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THREE CHAPTERS IN THE HISTORY OF FEMICIDE

PEDRO DANIEL GOMES MADEIRA

DISSERTAÇÃO ORIENTADA PELO PROF. DOUTOR JOÃO R. FIGUEIREDO E  
PELO PROF. DOUTOR ANTÓNIO M. FEIJÓ

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PEDRO DANIEL GOMES MADEIRA

Orientadores: Prof. Doutor António Maria Maciel de Castro Feijó e Prof. Doutor João Ricardo Raposo Figueiredo

Tese especialmente elaborada para obtenção do grau de Doutor em Teoria da Literatura

Júri:

- Doutor Miguel Bénard da Costa Tamen, Professor Catedrático, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa (Presidente)
- Doutor Rui Manuel Gomes de Carvalho Homem, Professor Catedrático, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto
- Doutora Ana Gabriela Vilela Pereira Macedo, Professora Catedrática, Instituto de Letras e Ciências Humanas da Universidade do Minho
- Doutor Abel José Barros Baptista, Professor Catedrático, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa
- Doutor Mário Carlos Fernandes Castro Avelar, Professor Catedrático, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa
- Doutor João Ricardo Raposo Figueiredo, Professor Auxiliar, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa

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## Contents

Abstract.....	7
<b>Resumo.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>I – Robert Macnish and the Genesis of the Femicide Story.....</b>	<b>28</b>
1 – The Original Femicide.....	29
2 – Chasing the Ghost of Ligeia.....	63
3 - The Mysterious Note.....	90
4 - “Mortar, Sand, and Hair:” “The Black Cat” as femicide story.....	123
5 – “Berenice” and “Morella:” Poe’s Early Femicides.....	145
6 – <i>Modus Operandi</i> : Poe’s Theory of the Mystery.....	169
7 – “Shadow of a Shade:” the Mystery of “Ligeia”.....	186
8 – The Rhetoric of Femicide.....	208
<b>II – Poe’s Method of Composition and the Sources of “Ligeia”.....</b>	<b>233</b>
1 — “Chemistry of Intellect:” Poe’s Theory of the Imagination.....	235
2— The Idea of Poison in “Ligeia”.....	292
3 — An Obvious Crime: The Murder of Rowena.....	311
4 — Ligeia’s Struggle.....	332
5 — The Secret of Ligeia’s Eyes: Glanvill, Witches and Animal Magnetism.....	351
6 — The Philosophy of Decomposition: “Ligeia” and <i>Memoirs of the Rev. William Tennent, Jr.</i> .....	381
7 — The Vampire Motif in “Wake Not the Dead” and “Ligeia”.....	396
8 — “The Somnambulist:” Another Source of “Ligeia”.....	415
9 — “Shadow of a Shade:” Ann Radcliffe’s <i>The Italian</i> and the Poetics of Delusion.....	431
10 — “Far Within the Pupils of my Beloved:” The Metaphor of Depth in Poe.....	451
<b>III – Poe, Godwin, Wollstonecraft.....</b>	<b>506</b>
1 – A Learned Wife: Representations of Intellectual Women in the Gothic Fiction of Matthew Lewis, Walter Scott, and Poe.....	508
2 – “Communication of Spirits:” Godwin’s rewriting of Wollstonecraft.....	543
3 – The Conflicting Conceptions of Gender in Godwin and Wollstonecraft.....	580
4 - “Friendship melting into Love:” Love and Marriage in Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and Poe....	610
5 – The Return of Wollstonecraft.....	643

**Appendix.....669**  
**Works Cited.....671**

## **Abstract**

This dissertation describes the genesis of the idea of femicide in a period of English and American Letters, the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, in which patriarchal values and constructions were entering a crisis which resulted in the revision of the idea of gender—in a way, that was the period in which the concept of gender was coded. In the first chapter, I look at the way the term femicide was first given currency in the English language in 1827 through Robert Macnish's *The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide*, a fiction disguised as a true story, and how it spawned a short-lived literary sub-genre. In the second chapter, I examine Poe's reworking of the femicide story, and to the ways in which he has drawn attention to its Gothic roots. Finally, in the third chapter, I offer a reading of *Memoirs of the Author of 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,'* in which I argue that Godwin's "sentimentalised" portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft, and by extension of the female intellectual, constitutes an implicit refutation of her ideas, and therefore can be profitably compared to the portraits Poe's femicide narrators make of Morella and Ligeia in the tales named after them.

## **Key Words**

Femicide

Sentimentality

Patriarchy

Gothic

Romanticism

## **Resumo**

Esta dissertação descreve a génese da ideia de femicídio durante um período nas letras Anglo-saxónicas, entre a última década do séc. XVIII e meados do século seguinte, em que os valores e elaborações ideológicas patriarcais entravam numa crise que conduziria a uma revisão da ideia de género (de certo modo, poder-se-ia mesmo dizer que é nesse período que o conceito de género começa a ser codificado). No primeiro capítulo, descrevo como o termo femicídio ganhou pela primeira vez projecção na língua inglesa depois da publicação, em 1827, de *The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide* de Robert Macnish, uma ficção apresentada ostensivamente como relato verídico que deu origem a um efémero sub-género de ficção, a que chamo “história de femicídio.” No segundo capítulo examino a reinterpretação da história de femicídio por Edgar Allan Poe, e sobre o modo como este autor pôs em evidência as suas raízes góticas. Finalmente, no terceiro capítulo, apresento uma leitura de *Memoirs of the Author of ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Woman’* em que argumento que o retrato “sentimentalizado” que Godwin aí faz de Mary Wollstonecraft, e por extensão da mulher intelectual, porquanto constitui uma refutação implícita das ideias dessa autora, ganha em ser comparado com os retratos que os narradores femicidas de Poe fazem das suas esposas em “Morella” e “Ligeia.”

## **Palavras-chave**

Femicídio

Sentimentalismo

Patriarcado

Gótico

Romantismo



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## Introduction

In this dissertation I will analyse literary representations of femicide and the femicide character in England and America in the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. The rhetoric of femicide depends on a set of sentimental elaborations that I think still pervade the critical discourses of our time in insidious ways. This is illustrated by the current criticism of the texts that form my subject. Such elaborations have created a layer of misunderstanding that can only be removed, I think, by the sort of careful analytical exercise I have attempted here.

The basic assumption I make in this dissertation is that there is in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft and Edgar Allan Poe a common element of subversion of the patriarchal ideology prevalent in their time and of the language that upheld it. I will argue specifically that both authors conveyed ideas, particularly conceptions of gender identity and of the relations between the sexes, that could not be expressed openly within a patriarchal cultural framework. These two authors achieved this, of course, in very different ways, and for the most part in distinct branches of literature—Wollstonecraft was essentially a philosopher who wrote novels and occasionally criticism; Poe, on the other hand, was certainly no philosopher, but a “magazinish,” that is, a poet, a critic, and short story writer, working within the first modern democracy. Yet, I believe, despite their diverging approaches, there is some fundamental affinity between them. This is the constitutive “duplicity” of their texts, which engage the available language with a view to reform it. Incidentally, this duplicity is arguably the distinctive trait of a text, as Michael Riffaterre has shown. In his book *La Production du Texte*, particularly in the first chapter “L’explication des Faits Littéraires,” he maintained that failure to recognise the disruptive potential of a text is a way of silencing it.

When she pleaded for the emancipation of women, Wollstonecraft found out that the only language available to her was that of a literary and intellectual establishment that was overwhelmingly male, and dominated by a patriarchal worldview. She realised, therefore, that, as a woman writer seeking to be taken seriously, her only option was to subvert this language, pushing it to absurd extremes, while radically revising the accepted representations of gender. Hopefully, from the wreck of the old speech a new language would emerge, and with it a new readership. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that woman writers in the nineteenth century “created submerged meanings, meanings hidden within or behind the more accessible ‘public’ content of their works, so that their literature could be read and appreciated even when its vital concern with female dispossession and disease was ignored” (72). I will argue that this applies also to the writings of my two subjects.

Nominally, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* addresses men in their own language—that is, in the language of patriarchy. This, of course, posed a seemingly unsurmountable difficulty. The patriarchal establishment did not recognise women basic intellectual capabilities. A woman philosopher like Wollstonecraft could not, according to mainstream ideology, be conceived; the idea could not even be expressed. It was a contradiction in terms. She would therefore necessarily be perceived as a monstrous hybrid creature: a masculine woman. Woman, it was thought, could at best ape the external, superficial features of reason, which was regarded as being essentially male. As she could not *become* a man, she could appear, but never be rational, or even reasonable. At the same time, this supposedly hopeless effort would rob her of her femininity—but not of her radical femaleness.

As a result, a public conditioned by patriarchy—and the public for philosophy was virtually entirely male—would not condescend to discuss such matters with a woman. Therefore, Wollstonecraft thought, man would have to be forced to acknowledge her arguments. And this could only be achieved by derailing patriarchal rhetoric. Woman, it was said, was naturally submissive,

and man was formed to lord over her through reason. And yet, Wollstonecraft pointed out, the soldier, commonly regarded as the paragon of virility, was the most systematically submissive and intellectually dependent of creatures. By patriarchal standards, he should therefore be regarded as a “feminine man.” This, of course, made no sense. Wollstonecraft thus aimed to demonstrate that the patriarchal system of oppression was preposterous and absurd, and that it belied man’s boasted rationality. The soldier was *trained* to have no will of his own; and so, argued Wollstonecraft, was woman.

Mary Wollstonecraft lived and wrote in a period in which gender conventions were in a crisis. Her work was an expression of that crisis, and so was Gothic fiction which, as George E. Haggerty writes in *Queer Gothic*, “reached its apex at the very moment when gender and sexuality were beginning to be qualified for modern culture;” this fiction, he continues, presented figurations of “unauthorized genders and sexualities” ranging from “sodomy” and “romantic friendship” to “sadism, masochism, necrophilia, cannibalism, masculinized females, and feminized males (2).” According to this critic, then: “Transgressive social-sexual relations are the most basic common denominator of Gothic writing” (2). But the subversive element in the Gothic has been persistently overlooked. I will look closely at some episodes in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797) that I believe illustrate this point. This is especially true, however, of the critical reception of Edgar Allan Poe’s work.

It is my understanding that he and Wollstonecraft have been the victims of a process of “sentimentalisation” by mainstream criticism, which remains rooted in patriarchal preconceptions. This “sentimentalisation” has functioned as an appeal to overlook their text, and to replace it with something, we may call it an ideology, that lies beyond it, as it were, and which is supposed to take precedence over their actual meaning. This functions as a sort of pre-existent text. This essentialist view of literature has often caused criticism of my two authors’ works to be more a reading of this supposed archetype than of their actual words. This I regard as a particular case of the kind of

“rationalisation” to which critics traditionally resort, and which, according to Riffaterre, negates the nature of the text itself, by accommodating it to “l’idéologie en cours, à la mythologie connue, au rassurant” (8).

The term “sentimentalisation,” then, is here used to denote a specific form of rationalisation that normalises contents and representations that patriarchal ideology regards as aberrant. Within that framework, female authorship, for example, was inevitably perceived as freakish. This view was somewhat qualified in the late eighteenth century, and throughout the nineteenth, through the extension of the doctrine of the “separate spheres” of male and female activity to literature. This resulted in a gendered theory of genre, which identified “sentimental” literature in general, and the novel in particular, which were then regarded as minor branches of literature, with the woman writer. This perception was reinforced by an actual change in the demographics of authorship. The field which had previously been dominated by male writers like Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, and Laurence Sterne, had been mostly taken over by women like Ann Radcliffe, arguably the most successful novelist of the period.

“Sentimental” prose fiction was deemed a suitable employ for women because it was imagined that it did not demand abstract thought, but only a lower form of intellect. Thus, for a while, the fiction that women were not capable of thinking, in the proper sense of the word, was maintained, even at a time when the female author was on the rise. Meanwhile, the “higher” regions of philosophical speculation, scientific research, serious poetry—or what was then regarded as such—, which were thought to involve real thought, continued to be reserved to man.

Thus, the female author was normalised. Providing she developed her activity within the limits assigned to her sex, it was acceptable for a woman to become a writer. The significance of Mary Wollstonecraft to the history of modern thought lies in her open defiance of the patriarchal doctrine that man thinks, and woman feels. And this is precisely what Godwin has succeeded in obscuring by his sentimental rewriting of his wife in *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the*

*Rights of Woman*. He taught us to overlook her arguments, which he claimed were deficient, and to look for the emotional content of her work instead—hence sentimentalisation. Perpetuating the confusion between patriarchal authority and authorship—the very confusion Wollstonecraft had sought to dispel—he tells us that her text had no intellectual content worth mentioning. Thus, in effect, he denies her work the status of text, by appealing to the typically patriarchal view that the statements of a woman express nothing but emotion. Thus, he does Wollstonecraft a disservice, for instead of revising the conceptions of gender according to her views, he reconciles her to the patriarchal ideology she rejected. He admits, in other words, that a woman philosopher would be a “masculine” woman; but Mary—for Godwin she is always plain Mary—was no philosopher, therefore, he reassuringly concludes, she was a woman.

Most feminist critics, however, have subscribed Godwin’s portrayal of Wollstonecraft—in doing so, as Brenda Ayres has argued, they have allowed his opinion of Wollstonecraft to take precedence over her own opinions. This position, I will argue, flows from an equivocal about the meaning of reason. Modern feminism emphasises the specificity of the female experience, and regards reason as a patriarchal construction. Thus, it distanced itself from the *meaning* of Wollstonecraft’s proposals, and tended to value her more for her life than for her work, essentially agreeing with Godwin that she had attempted to appropriate intrinsically “male” modes of thought. For Wollstonecraft, however, reason meant the basic intellectual capability that was generally denied to woman, and which justified the *a priori* dismissal of her opinions on all “abstract” subjects. Women had no voice in science, philosophy, or politics. In our time, I hope, this basic intellectual ability is recognised to women by most people, and Wollstonecraft played no mean role in bringing about this cultural change. Are women and man on an equal footing? Certainly not. Do women face implicit bias? Of course. In Wollstonecraft’s time, however, the bias against women was explicit. The female scientist and the female philosopher are now a reality most men would be ashamed to deny. In Wollstonecraft’s day, on the other hand, most men would be ashamed to admit

even the possibility of the female intellectual—especially if the woman suspected of intellectuality was their wife.

Thus understood, sentimentalisation is the mechanism by which patriarchy asserted itself, and illegitimated dissent. Gilbert and Gubar have persuasively argued that Western literary history is intrinsically patriarchal, and that this continued to be true of the work of modern critics like Harold Bloom who “metaphorically defines the poetic process as a sexual encounter between a male poet and his female muse” (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 47). Where,” the former ask, “does the female poet fit in?” (47). Significantly, the same male criticism that has systematically devalued female authorship, has also expressed reluctance in admitting Poe to the canon. In F. O. Matthiessen’s epoch-making *American Renaissance*, for example, Poe is mostly relegated to the footnotes. More importantly, most modern criticism of Poe offers a completely sentimentalised portrayal of the author. Almost everyone agrees, indeed, that most of Poe’s work is basically meaningless, and that it is the product of emotion, rather than intellectual effort. In a word, most critics claim that what Poe did in his poetry and most of his prose (the detective stories being usually excepted) was mostly the result of feeling, as opposed to thinking. This is precisely the point Godwin made for Wollstonecraft. Therefore, I argue that Poe does not fit into the patriarchal view of the history of literature any better than the woman writer does—and this for very similar reasons.

The traditional reading of Poe—which has remained largely unchallenged to this day—is a special case, I think, of the traditional reading of Gothic fiction, which has also generally been regarded, with very few exceptions, as artistically rudimentary, and worth reading only as an unsophisticated, and almost unmediated document of the subconscious of its authors. In fact, psychoanalytically inclined critics frequently equate Gothic novels with dreams. Thus, the Gothic is credited “with, in Robert B. Heilman’s words, the ‘historical office’ of ‘[t]he discovery of passion, [the] rehabilitation of the extra-rational’” (qtd. in Sedgwick 1). Likewise, Poe has been either



dismissed or extravagantly praised for his extra-rationality. In either case, he is not considered an artist, and the role of conscious elaboration in his work has often been completely devalued, if not downright denied. Harold Bloom, notably in his introduction to the volume of his *How To write About* series dedicated to him, significantly stated that it was always best to read Poe in translation, thus denying in the strongest possible terms the status of text to his writings. Indeed, in the prevailing “sentimental,” intrinsically patriarchal critical approach, Poe became identified with the deviant paradigm that is the correlative of the “masculine woman:” the “hysterical man.”

Critical portrayals of Poe have usually emphasised “feeling” over “thinking” in an extreme way, as if, first, the two were mutually exclusive, and second, it was possible to conceive writing as a totally “extra-rational” process. In the final analysis, this would mean that any attempt to understand Poe would be futile—the hypothesis, of course, confirms itself and is therefore unassailable, providing the underlying axiom is granted. This, I insist, is exactly what Godwin has done for Wollstonecraft. As a result of sentimentalisation, then, the very possibility of a submerged meaning to Poe’s work has been denied in the face of compelling textual evidence to the contrary.

I would also like to stress that the selection of the corpus of texts examined in this dissertation was not determined by a preexistent thesis. On the contrary, I came to Wollstonecraft and Godwin’s biography of her by way of Poe. My starting assumption was that Poe’s work, contrary to what is often stated, was legible, or in other words, that it could be understood, and that the best way to understand him was to attempt a more comprehensive survey of the context of his work than had previously been attempted. Indeed, another result of the sentimentalisation of his work, was that he came to be regarded as somewhat of a “singularity” in the history of literature. His creations, it is generally thought, sprang directly from his “perverse” psyche, and are essentially unrelated to anything that had been done before—in other words, there was no context or pretext for them.

I sought to find both the context, and a viable pretext, for two of Poe's tales, "Morella" and "Ligeia," which present particularly aberrant representations of gender—aberrant, that is, in relation to the prevailing patriarchal views represented in the tale by the male protagonist. Indeed, these two tales are notable for their depiction of intellectual women, who are idealised *post mortem* by their husbands, in a narrative that claims to be *about* them, but is, in reality, more a biography of the writer than a biography of its ostensible subject. The impression that results from such narratives, moreover, is that the title-character was not exactly a woman, or at least that her behavior was fundamentally unfeminine. These aspects of the tale are, indeed, very nearly unprecedented in the literature of Poe's day, and, therefore, particularly significant literary facts requiring critical interpretation. Criticism of Poe's work, however, has mostly taken these distinguishing characteristics for granted, under the assumption that they were somehow typical of the age. At face value these tales do indeed appear to reinforce the kind of patriarchal prejudices that determined Godwin's assessment of Wollstonecraft. However, I am convinced that they too have a submerged anti-patriarchal meaning.

I believe, specifically, that "Morella" and "Ligeia" are deliberate parodies in the Gothic idiom of Godwin's *Memoirs*, which is the only precedent in Poe's culture of the most salient formal traits of those two tales. I also argue that the relationship of Wollstonecraft and Godwin is paradigmatic of the plight of the female intellectual in the patriarchal society of her and Poe's time. Although this fact has been obscured by decades of over-sympathetic and ingenuous criticism of *Memoirs*, recent scholarship has pointed out the necessity of disentangling Wollstonecraft from Godwin's image of her, and particularly of emancipating our understanding of her work from his sentimental rhetoric. Poe, I will further argue, was peculiarly aware of the ways in which Godwin subtly, and seemingly accidentally, demeaned his wife's work, and therefore modelled the ideologically charged rhetoric of his anonymous narrators after *Memoirs*, in order to give visibility to the submerged patriarchal resonances of Godwin's book.

The arguments developed in this dissertation, however, are cumulative. The thesis expounded in the previous paragraph is supported by the research documented in the two first chapters, in which I attempt to describe how Poe coded the submerged sense of his fiction. In order to do this, it was necessary to place “Morella” and “Ligeia” in the broader context of Poe’s work, and also to attempt a survey of the texts to which he surreptitiously alludes in those tales, and on which that submerged meaning depends.

I argue that the two tales which form the basic focus on my analysis, “Morella” and “Ligeia,” belong to a distinctive subset of Gothic fiction, or rather a particular development of the Gothic that I have termed the “femicide story.” This is a genre—in the same sense that the “detective story” may be termed a genre—that has hitherto been completely ignored by critics of nineteenth-century fiction. This oversight, incidentally, has decidedly contributed, in my opinion, to the overstatement of Poe’s originality. The “femicide story,” then, is a type of short story that is told in the first person by a male narrator who belatedly confesses he has killed, or at least implies that he was responsible for the death of a female lover, but somehow managed to avoid punishment for the deed.

The genesis of the “femicide story” is comparable to that of the detective story. Poe’s 1841 story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is universally recognised as having set the template of all subsequent iterations of the form. Although many antecedents have been proposed for it, no one seriously challenges Poe’s priority. Likewise, the femicide story has many antecedents, namely in Gothic fiction, the Broadside ballad, and the Blackwood school of narrative, but, the particular form to which I wish to bring attention, was originally established by Robert Macnish’s *Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide*, published anonymously in 1827. This was undoubtedly the model of a string of tales written during the following decade by Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and Edgar Allan Poe, among others, all of which share some family resemblances that point back to Macnish. The form enjoyed a brief period of great popularity during the 1830’s, before it vanished as

suddenly as it had appeared. This, and Macnish's untimely death at the age of 34, in 1837, partly explain why this literary fad has gone mostly unnoticed. Poe, however, continued to present variations on the femicide template throughout his career. In fact, with him the femicide story developed into a veritable art form.

It is my conviction that Poe's femicide stories constitute the artistic acme of this short-lived form—, but also that they form a special group within the femicide story tradition, which reflects Poe's peculiar approach to fiction. These are, I argue, covert femicides, that is, tales of femicide in which the femicide—the criminal and the crime—are not readily perceivable, but rather cunningly disguised. The true identity of the narrator is intimated through a wealth of hints, or clues, both textual and intertextual. These two stories, indeed, lack a formal *dénouement*—for this reason, their plot has been regarded as indefinite, which in turn has been taken as confirmation of Poe's reputation for “extra-rationality.” In reality, however, I believe they are a particular embodiment of the “mystery,” a form of fiction that Poe described and theorised in his review of Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. The “dark hints” of murder in that novel, he tells us, should only have been employed *if* the reader was supposed to discover an unstated *dénouement*, that was notwithstanding inherent to the “plot.” And this, I argue, is precisely the purpose such hints serve in “Morella” and “Ligeia.”

Yet, at the same time, these stories have a viable patriarchal interpretation, which ensured their circulation. In this sense, then, they develop the sort of subversive duplicity that is characteristic of the Gothic. This duplicity, incidentally, was integral to Macnish's original femicide story, which was itself a development of the Gothic formula. The Gothic represented patriarchal oppression, but always in a setting that was conventionally displaced to an ostensibly alien setting, remote in time, space, or both. In the late eighteenth-century, however, a new form of fiction emerged that, while retaining the essential characteristics of the Gothic, dispensed with this disguise. A good example of this is Mary Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel *Maria; Or, the Wrongs*

*of Woman*. There, the typically Gothic horrors were transferred to the here and now. The medieval castle where the heroines of Radcliffe had been confined gives way to the modern madhouse to which Maria is consigned by her husband, and the vague threats of femicide are replaced by, among others, the until then unutterable horror of life-threatening abortive procedures. Thus, the plight of woman was becoming increasingly visible—or harder to sweep under the rug. Macnish's *Confessions* is another symptom of this cultural shift. According to the *OED*, the word “femicide” had previously, in 1801, been employed figuratively to denote the abandonment of a pregnant woman by her “seducer” (entry 1); but *Confessions*, first published in 1827, is, according to same source, the first time the word was used to denote a form of actual violence for which there had been no name (entry 2).

Almost forgotten for more than a century, this tale has, in the last few decades, gained some notoriety in modern discussions of “femicide.” However, it has been confused with a real-life confession of an actual femicide, that is, as a heartfelt document of the extreme patriarchal ideology that determined the crime. This was, of course, Macnish's intention—but there is a great difference between a real femicide and a fictional femicide. The history of the publication of this fiction demonstrates conclusively two things: firstly, that Macnish intended to give visibility to a form of ideologically determined violence that he felt was not being acknowledged, and secondly, that he was convinced that it was not safe to associate one's name to a fictional depiction of femicide. In order to circumvent censorship, and avoid public outrage, he disguised his fiction as a true story, but took pains to ensure the disguise was not thoroughly convincing. In this sense, then, his tale had an element of subversion to it, that Edgar Allan Poe would later greatly expand.

William M\*\*r, Macnish's femicide, indeed, develops exactly the same extreme patriarchal arguments that were inherent to the then commonplace comparison of women with angels. Such representations implied that woman was alien to the physical world, and particularly to sexuality. She thus became an emblem of absolute altruism and self-sacrifice, as well as the rejection of

sensual pleasure. This ideal woman, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, had no body, and therefore, while apparently exalting women above humanity, in practice this dehumanising discourse degrades them: “It is debilitating to be *any* woman on a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters” (*Madwoman* 53). These critics also point out the obvious inference to be drawn from this kind of argumentation: “Whether she becomes an *object d’art* or a saint, however, it is the surrender of her self—of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both—that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead” (25). In other words, the only “good” woman is a dead woman, for only through death can she atone for her carnality.

The object of the femicide story, as conceived by Macnish and developed by Poe, was, I argue, precisely that of implying that femicide was the logical consequence of a dehumanised patriarchal view of woman. In his fiction and poetry—and for Poe, a poem was also a form of fiction, in the sense that it “feigned” opinions and feelings of an imaginary character—he systematically associated such extreme idealisations of women, more or less explicitly, with femicide and necrophilia. The male characters of those fictions are, indeed, like the femicide in Macnish’s tale, presented as a sort of “everyman,” with which the reader is invited to empathise. But then, their authority is discreetly—or not so discreetly, if one pays close attention to the text—discredited through many clues. Thus, I believe that Poe, and in a less radical way Macnish, did more or less the same thing that the female writers mentioned in *The Madwoman in the Attic* were doing in the same period: “By the end of the eighteenth century (...) women were not only writing, they were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised” (Gilbert and Gubar 44).

I argue also that Poe displays the “femicidal” sensibility discussed above not only in his “serious” fiction, but also, for example, in the openly satirical “A Loss of Breath,” and in poems like

“The Sleeper.” I also point out that Poe’s debilitating representations of women, although perfectly typical of his time, are presented in a completely unorthodox way. The irony that undermines such representations in Poe is entirely absent from most contemporary versions of the myth of the angel-woman. I illustrate this point by comparing the femicide story with Bulwer-Lytton’s *Eugene Aram*.

Furthermore, I attempt to read “Morella” and “Ligeia” in the context of Poe’s work, and to accommodate them to his criticism, but also to trace Poe’s many covert allusions in those tales to a variety of sources—these allusions were, I argue, one of the ways through which he coded submerged meanings into his text. The most significant of these is perhaps his allusion in the second of those tales to the notorious witch-hunter Joseph Glanvill, which is indirectly singled out as the representative of the patriarchal superstition that I believe Poe intended to uncover.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, then, I attempt to define the femicide story, its corpus, and its peculiar rhetoric, and integrate “Morella” and “Ligeia,” and other of Poe’s tales and poems, in that specific tradition. The main focus of the second chapter is Poe’s method of composition. There I take a closer look at his poetry and criticism. I also attempt to show that, in addition to his borrowings from the tradition of the femicide story, Poe adapted materials from many other sources for “Morella” and “Ligeia” that are equally decisive to understanding his aims.

Of the three chapters, the second is the lengthier. This is in part the result of the great number of sources portions of which Poe adapted for the two tales on which I have focused my analysis. Most of all, however, the greater length of the second chapter comes as a consequence of the necessity of dispelling what I regard as some widely accepted critical misconceptions concerning Poe and his work. Poe is usually seen as an extreme Romanticist, that is, as a visionary who regarded literature as the vehicle of “extra-rational” transcendent intuitions. I believe, however, that this theory was imposed on his text, a close reading of which reveals that he systematically ridicules all forms of “transcendentalism” and “irrationalism,” as well as the Romantic myth of

poetic creation itself, through the same mechanisms of misdirection that allow him to draw attention to the submerged plight of the thinking woman.

Finally, in the third chapter, I endeavor to demonstrate that Godwin's representation of Wollstonecraft is in evident contradiction with all of her statements, and particularly that his claim that she suffered, during the last months of her life, an ideological crisis that resulted in her rejection of most of the views that she had expressed in her work is entirely unfounded, and that to accept it is to accept that Godwin's authority on the subject of Wollstonecraft overrides her own. I also argue that the former's opinions have, in some cases, been confused with those of the latter, and that this is the origin of the misconception that in *A Vindication* she had rejected sexuality and denied sensual pleasure. The contrast between her opinions, preserved in her work, and her biographer's portrayal of her, I further argue, is similar to the contrast between Poe's narrator's depiction of their wives and their statements. This final chapter, however, should not be regarded as a comparison between Poe, on the one side, and Wollstonecraft's work and Godwin's biography of her on the other. The exercise I propose to the reader is of a different nature. I believe that *Memoirs* and the writings of Wollstonecraft constitute the pretext of Poe's text, and that he intended to draw attention to the way in which she was sentimentalised by Godwin. As I have previously stated, I arrived at Wollstonecraft through Poe, and my reading of her story is, therefore, informed by two of Poe's tales, "Morella" and "Ligeia," which I think are a deliberate representation of her case.

The intellectual women in Poe's tales are, as Richard Wilbur put it in the introduction to his editions of Poe's *Poems* (1959), "pythagorised" out of existence, in order that their husbands may appropriate their memory into their psyche. These stories may be regarded as reinterpretations of one of the common incarnations of the Romantic myth of creation, in which the beloved woman typically becomes a symbol of the irretrievable spiritual essence of man, without which he is fundamentally incomplete, and for which the poet is doomed eternally to search. Thus, Poe's tales have been themselves taken as extreme statements of the Romantic creed. This fails to take into



account, however, the hints of femicide in the tales, on the one hand, and, on the other, the many indications that the narrator is deluded, and distorts the events in the tale. Thus, Poe brings into relief that the Romantic myth is fundamentally sexist, and suppresses women by incorporating them, as it were, into men. This, Poe's text suggests, is what Godwin has done. Indeed, the death of Wollstonecraft is the condition of Godwin's revision of her. In this sense, then, one might say that she had to die, in order to be domesticated by her husband, just like Morella and Ligeia had to be "Pythagorised."

Godwin's act of character assassination, indeed, manifests his inability to admit the existence of the woman intellectual, which developed into a form of blindness that is clearly displayed in *Memoirs*. Poe's narrators in "Morella" and "Ligeia" display a similar blindness, only slightly exaggerated. Through their revision of their wives they construe them as pseudo-men, hence as pseudo-intellectuals. Thus, they annul the threat their intelligence represented to their fragile ego by representing them, in effect, as witches. I think one must admit that, without noticing, Godwin was very close from arriving at a similar conclusion. By putting all these Godwin-like sentiments into the mouth of a femicide, Poe indirectly brought into view Godwin's implicit bias against his exceptional wife, thereby exposing it as a manifestation of the prevailing patriarchal culture that, according to his review of *A Drama of Exile*, had denied women like Elizabeth Barrett Browning a fair chance of being recognised as a great poet.

From the foregoing I think it becomes clear that this dissertation does not fall within the category of "cultural studies." It is—at least, I hope it is—strictly a work of criticism. As I see it, the duty of the critic is to understand the text. I believe, indeed, that the only duty of the critic, or any scholar for that matter, is intellectual honesty. By this I mean that a critic should never admit an explanation that he or she does not understand, only because it is the most widely accepted. Arguments from authority should never be allowed to take precedence over one's own judgment. The views expressed here contradict, in many respects, the assumptions that form the common

ground on which most of Poe and Wollstonecraft scholarship have been built. These assumptions, however, appeared to me to be flawed, and therefore I tried to come up with new answers for old questions. I advance these answers, however, not for the sake of novelty, but because they appear to me more compelling than those previously proposed. In short, I thought it was my duty to make an honest attempt to understand the texts I look at here—and that is my only excuse. This answers are, of course, still very much determined by previous criticism. As regards Poe, particularly, I benefited immensely from the insights of others, but most of all, from Susan Amper's contributions to the field. She maintained the unorthodox view that Poe was only kidding in his so-called serious tales—I think she is right.

Being intellectually honest, of course, is not the same thing as being infallible. All human knowledge is relative. Poe constantly reminded his readers of this, warning against what he called the “frantic spirit of *generalization*” and ridiculing flattering pretensions to absolute knowledge, which were habitually accompanied by a set of directions (Poe, “Exordium” 43). The writers who purported to impart such knowledge instructed the reader to refrain from thinking and relinquish the “narrow” views of the understanding. Poe mimicked this rhetoric in his work, but always subverting it so as to expose it as a form of pernicious irrationalism—in the second chapter, for example, I attempt to show that Poe was not, as is so often claimed, an adept of animal magnetism, but that he consistently ridiculed its doctrines, in the same way that he ridiculed “transcendentalism.” Poe, and in this he agreed with Wollstonecraft, suspected all discourse that inhibited thinking, and all self-evident “truths.”

His hoaxes showed me that we, as readers, are much more credulous, and much more easily mislead than we like to think. One can never be too cautious with Poe. We find ourselves again and again falling into his tricks, only to realise our mistake later on. The time I spent reading him has brought me nothing but a feeling of sobering humiliation. But I cherish this humiliation, for overtime it developed into what I regard as a healthy scepticism. I learned to value my sense of

doubt. I believe this was what Poe intended. Those of his readers who accept irrational claims uncritically are punished with vague horror and confusion; on the other hand, the reader who doubts appearances, and suspects commonly held views, is rewarded with a solution to his mysteries. Thus, by leading us to confront our own superstitions, he forces upon us the realisation that we are as superstitious now as we have ever been; that we have not become generally enlightened, and never will, and therefore must never abstain from thinking, or allow ourselves to believe that all our thinking was already done for us by others. To be sure, the consequences of being deceived by fiction are never too severe. However, the same means may be employed in non-fiction, where there is much more at stake. Therefore, Poe's benign charlatannerie may not be altogether unprofitable.

He does not tell us these things, for he is not a scientist or a philosopher. He is a poet, in the broadest sense of the word. The job of the poet, he thought, was to craftily deceive his readers. As he saw it, in order to be read, the poet had to appear to conform with the opinions of the majority—this was especially true in a democracy—, but he could—and indeed should—lead us to question such opinions. Thus, he reminds us, through all the humiliation to which he has subjected us, that all our knowledge of the world is based on the concept of probability, and that we must either accept its limitations, or become the hopeless dupes of countless humbugs; that we all, regardless of our sex, must embrace uncertainty, and learn to measure it, or be dazzled into submission by claims of absolute knowledge. My hope for this dissertation is that it may contribute, in a small way, to encourage others to think and question. Some might say I aim too low; others that my expectations are presumptuous. I believe, however, that, as a scholar, I have no right to expect more, or hope for less.

## I – Robert Macnish and the Genesis of the Femicide Story

## 1 – The Original Femicide

From the late 1820's to the mid 1840's, approximately, there flourished, in England and the United States alike, a peculiar style of short prose fiction with certain very specific thematic and formal traits. This distinctive type of fiction will be referred throughout this dissertation as the "femicide story." I include under this heading Edward Bulwer-Lytton's "Manuscript Found in a Madhouse" (1829), Charles Dickens's similarly titled "A Madman's Manuscript," from the *Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), "The Somnambulist," an anonymous narrative published in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1838 (which, however, will be discussed in the second chapter, which deals more specifically with some hitherto unidentified sources of Poe's fiction), and a string of tales by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849): "Loss of Breath" (1832)<sup>1</sup> (which will also not be dealt with in this chapter, but a detailed analysis of which may be found in the third chapter), "Berenice" (1835) "Morella" (1835) (all of which belong to the first group of Poe's short-fictions, the so-called "Tales of the Folio Club"), "Ligeia" (1838), and "The Black Cat" (1843). All of these very peculiar tales can be traced to a common ancestor, a hoax entitled *Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide* by the Scottish physician and habitual contributor of *Blackwood* Robert Macnish (1802-1837) in which all the characteristics for which the other tales are remarkable were combined for the first time. Originally published as a pamphlet in Glasgow in 1827, and now mostly forgotten, along with its author—it was last printed, as far as I could ascertain, in 1844—, this narrative, which was marketed as a true story, made quite a splash in its day. I should point out, however, that this is not meant as an exhaustive list.

The femicide story forms a distinct group within the fiction of that era which I believe it would be useful to treat as a separate genre, or sub-genre. I deliberately employ these terms in a loose sense, as this study is not intended as a systematic inquiry into the problem of genre in

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1 The tale was first published under this title in September 1835, in the *Southern Literary Messenger*. This was, however, a reworked version of "A Decided Loss," which had appeared originally in the *Saturday Courier* of Philadelphia, in September 10, 1832. It is, therefore, one of Poe's earliest tales.

literature; the problem I intend to discuss is the femicide story itself. The kind of inquiry I propose has never been attempted. Indeed, because they have not been treated as a group, each of these tales has tended to be regarded by critics as something of a singularity in the history of literature.

Such classifications necessarily involve choices on the part of the critic that may seem injudicious to others. In this case, my choices tend to emphasise the family resemblance between these stories, with the conviction that this may promote a better understanding of particular texts, which is the ultimate object of my analysis. I will argue, then, that the femicide story is a literary entity reasonably distinguished from other forms of fiction. This distinction is based on formal, thematic, as well as historical criteria which I will try to define as accurately as possible from the outset.

Formally, these are short prose tales told in the first person by the male protagonist. They are invariably presented as “confessions,” in which the narrator presents facts about his life that had not been publicly known, or which had only been suspected. All of these men have caused the death of at least one woman, typically a female lover, occasionally a mother, sister or daughter. In many of the tales, the violence is explicit, in others implicit, to be discovered by the reader. Sometimes the deed is performed by physical, others by psychological violence. Thus, in some of the stories the narrator is a confessed femicide (this is the case in what I regard as the original femicide story, Robert Macnish’s *Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide*, or Poe’s “The Black Cat”), in others he is a suspected femicide, and indeed must ultimately be exposed as one, as the interpretation of the facts that allows him to exculpate himself, and which usually presupposes supernatural intervention, does not stand up to reason—these stories, all by Poe and following a scheme of his own devising, belong to a special category, the covert femicide story (“Ligeia,” “Morella” and “Berenice” fall in that subgroup). The narrator may also confess the intent to kill but declare he did not carry out his plan. This is the case of the “madman” narrator in Dickens’s “A Madman’s Manuscript,” and also of Poe’s early satirical sketch “A Loss of Breath.” In the latter, the narrator was on the point of killing

his wife when he lost his voice; in the former, he was about to stab his wife in her sleep when she suddenly came to—the shock, however, and the very reasonable fear that if she fell asleep she might never wake up, which the narrator did nothing to allay, ended up killing her anyway. Another variant is the narrator who either commits or appears to commit femicide by proxy: the actual killing is done (“The Somnambulist”), or may at first appear to be done (“Ligeia”), by another, who nonetheless acted in compliance with the narrator’s wishes. Also, though this may not be immediately apparent, the motives of the narrator frequently involve incest (*Confessions*, “Berenice,” “Morella”).

In all cases, the narrators cannot entirely conceal that they are sexually attracted to dead or dying women, and this desire often prompts gruesome acts of violence (“Berenice” is perhaps the most obvious example of this) or of more or less explicit necrophilia. Yet, their perverse sexuality is always disguised by the posthumous sentimental idealisation of the dead woman. The narrators are also invariably haunted by the image of their victims, and express regret for their loss in the most pathetic tones. Yet, at the same time, even when they recognise the deed, they disavow responsibility for it. In some way or another, they agree that the death of the beloved woman could not be helped. In fact, the narrator speaks as if he, not the dead women, were the victim: he was prompted by an innate evil propensity which could not be resisted; the cat made him do it; his old flame finished off his ailing wife; his insanely jealous dead wife came back from the grave to kill her rival.

Yet, although they always find an excuse for themselves, most of them allow none for the women who were sacrificed. Some suggest the dead women had sinned against conventional patriarchal morals in some way, either by *letting themselves* be seduced by the narrator and engaging in extra-marital sex, or by studying evil and witchcraft, and therefore, they imply, deserved to die. In other cases, they are more subtle. In “The Black Cat,” for example, the explicit moral of the tale presupposes the idea that women rank lower in the scale of being than cats. The

narrator of “Ligeia,” the sliest and most perverse of the bunch, gives us to understand that his first wife did not actually deserve to die, but that he had no way of knowing it before she died—for only through her deed of death did she prove worthy of his exacting love. Dickens’s “madman” narrator is, in this respect, an exception. He acknowledges that he killed his wife and does not attempt to extenuate his guilt by intimating she somehow deserved to die—yet, he too exempts himself of all responsibility. The mildest, least criminal, of all these characters is Bulwer-Lytton’s “madman,” whose *physical* monstrosity, which he had deliberately concealed from her, frightens his pregnant bride to death.

At first glance, all these tales appear particular embodiments of the typical male narrative identified by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. But the theme of all these tales is, I will argue, not merely the death of a beautiful woman—that most poetic of topics mentioned in Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition”—but femicide. Indeed, I believe these tales are designed to suggest that the kind of male sensibility that associates dead or dying women with sexual desire, which is represented by the narrators, is the cause of these women’s deaths. In other words, the way in which these deeds are handled by the authors of femicide stories tends to highlight the specificity of those deeds. The focus of these authors, however, is not so much the deed, but the femicide character, the narrator of the tale, and his motivations. What makes this narrator singular, is that he carries to the extreme a common male sensibility. By focusing on this sensibility, the authors of the femicide story intimated that the deeds depicted in the tale formed a separate phenomenon, that should be distinguished from common homicide. This political agenda was clearly indicated by Macnish’s title, but became less obvious, although no less decisive, in later tales.

Bulwer-Lytton’s tale, however, is something of an exception within this context. Although, according to the criteria I defined, it must still be regarded as a femicide story, thematically it pushes the limits of the genre, inasmuch as the narrator of the tale is no longer a bona fide femicide, but the innocent instrument of his wife’s destruction. As I see it, Bulwer-Lytton subverts the



femicide story, in the same sense that the other femicide stories may be said to subvert the typical patriarchal sentimental narrative.

Finally, the femicide story, may also be regarded as a historico-literary phenomenon with very clear chronological boundaries. Dickens, Bulwer-Lytton, Poe, and the anonymous author of “The Somnambulist” were probably all aware of their debt to Macnish, or at the very least of their debt to each other. All of them accepted the rules that had been established beforehand by a predecessor and introduced variations to the basic outline that he had provided. This is clearly indicated by the formal and thematic characteristics shared by these tales. The form enjoyed its greatest popularity in the 1830s—most of the tales I mentioned were written during that decade—, and then quickly faded from view. Even in that period, it was a minor fad—none of these writers appears to have written more than one femicide story, with the single exception of Poe. Yet, two of the most successful English writers of that period (for, although his star as long since faded, in his day Bulwer-Lytton’s popularity as a novel writer was perhaps only rivaled by Walter Scott’s) tried their hand at it. Then, just as the femicide story was getting out of fashion, Poe wrote some of his best tales in the idiom. Indeed, I regard “Ligeia” as both the apex and the swansong of the femicide story. The last true femicide story, I would contend, is “The Black Cat,” also by Poe, which appeared in 1843.

Other tales of that period dealt with similar themes, “The Stroller’s Tale” in *Pickwick* is a good example, but do not fulfill the formal criteria for inclusion in the femicide story group, though they certainly document a general concern with femicide. On the other hand, although the femicide story, as I have here defined it, virtually disappeared after 1843, it certainly left its mark in literature. It would be tempting to include in my canon such influential and critically acclaimed works as Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. That particular work and many others on which the influence of those of Poe’s tales I analyse here is equally noticeable are not only formally distinct

from my stories, but were also written in a different context, and respond to different cultural anxieties than those by which I believe the authors of my stories were actuated.

I credit the authors of femicide stories with the invention of a new fictional character which reflects cultural concerns that had become particularly acute in that period. This narrator defines the singular point of view from which the tales are written, their peculiar tone; in other words, it defines their style. In this sense, the femicide story is character oriented. Its protagonist-narrator defines the femicide story much like the detective defines the detective story. Of course, there have always been woman-killers in fiction. Many can be found, for example, in as widely read bodies of literature as the works of Shakespeare and traditional ballads. These may be regarded as the forerunners of the femicide, in the same sense that, say, Oedipus may be said to be a forerunner of the modern detective. The direct ancestors of Macnish's femicide, however, are the villains of late eighteenth-century Gothic novels—particularly “monks,” and at their head the notorious Ambrosio, the unforgettable protagonist of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*. Still, it must be remarked that, despite the many obvious affinities between the monk and the narrator of *Confessions*, Macnish was the first to employ the word “femicide” to identify such a character, and, availing himself of a type of authorial fiction popularised by the Maga circle, also the first to confine the reader to the perspective of such a character, with very little or no commentary.<sup>2</sup>

As a literary figure, the femicide exploits the well-known tendency of the reader to identify with a first-person narrator. Yet, the authority in the tale is problematic. Indeed, the femicide

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2 Dickens's “A Madman's Manuscript” is the only exception. The “clergyman's manuscript” which came to Mr. Pickwick, supposedly written by the madman himself, concluded with a commentary in another hand, presumably that of the physician who attended the author in the madhouse. The unidentified commentator regarded the story as “an instance of the baneful results of energies misdirected in early life,” aggravated by “the strange delusion, founded upon a well-known medical theory, strongly contended for by some, and as strongly contested by others, that an hereditary madness existed in his family” (“Madman's” 145). Macnish's femicide, as we will see, is also convinced that he was the victim of an innate, unaccountable tendency for evil, although he does not believe it to be hereditary. In any case, Macnish also gives as ground to suspect that he is deluded on that point.

The tale, though etched into the narrative of the adventures of the Pickwick club, receives no further commentary from either the third-person narrator or his characters. Mr. Pickwick himself, it is true, was somewhat startled by his reading: “casting a fearful glance around, he once more scrambled hastily between the sheets, and soon fell asleep.” When he awoke, “The gloom which had oppressed him on the previous night, had disappeared with the dark shadows which shrouded the landscape, and his thoughts and feelings were as light and gay as the morning himself” (Dickens, “Madman” 145-46). He never gave the story a second thought.

functions as a sort of perverse everyman figure, and in this it is fundamentally distinguished from the male tyrants of Gothic novels. A double mechanism of moral distancing ensured that such characters got no sympathy from the reader. The third-person narrator, which represented a voice of authority that tends to be identified with the author, was the moral compass of the tale. This voice was never aligned with the terrible male villains of the novels. Secondly, Gothic novels were invariably set in some ostensibly alien place, distant in time, space, or both. The femicide, however, is permitted to narrate his own tale, and to extract a moral from it without being contradicted. In addition, his tale is set in the very near past, and narrated in the present. In many ways, the narrator speaks and thinks as the average man of his time, and even seems to claim the reader's sympathy by invoking a common moral ground—he does not seem Gothic in the least. The femicide story, therefore, distinguishes itself from the typical Gothic by not being ostensibly didactic. Yet, these men did very unusual things, by deed or omission they have assaulted, killed, imprisoned, or otherwise terrorised women. This creates a characteristic atmosphere of moral ambiguity. To be more precise, the moral of the tale, despite the narrator's confidence, is unsettled—and this in turn affects the credibility of their take on events. The use of an unreliable first-person narrator, and the absence of an authorial voice, then, is characteristic of the femicide story. Although the author never intervenes, as it were, in his own person, to pass moral judgment on his narrators, he insidiously discountenances his narrator's views behind his back. Thus, the reader is presented with an alternative: either accept the femicide's moral or detect the flaw in his discourse.

The femicide, then, defines the femicide story. But what exactly does the word “femicide” mean? The form “-cide” being the English transliteration of two different Latin suffixes, “-cidium” and “-cida,” which refer to the act of killing and its agent, respectively, the same spelling, “femicide,” corresponds to two different words, defined by the *OED* as “the killing of a woman” and “one who kills a woman” (entries 1 and 2, respectively). In its strict etymological sense, indeed,

“femicide” refers to a variety of “homicide” (both the deed and the doer) defined by the specification of the victim’s sex.

However, the word “femicide” is now seldom used in the sense consigned by the dictionary. In modern usage, it is almost never used to refer to the killer, and almost exclusively to the killing, and even then in a restricted sense of a crime defined not just by the victim’s sex, but by its motive, which has been the subject of explicit theorisation starting in the mid 1970’s. Since then, in the loose sense of sexist murder of women, the term has gained currency in academia and, to a lesser extent, also in the press. Recently, the term has even been assimilated to the official language of the World Health Organisation.<sup>3</sup>

The feminist scholar Diana E. H. Russell appears to have been the first to establish this narrow meaning of “femicide.” During the First International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women, held in Brussels in 1976, she argued for the adoption of a specific denomination for the misogynous murder of women. In *Crimes Against Women: Proceedings of the International Tribunal*, Russell and her collaborator Nicole Van de Ven wrote: “We must realize that a lot of homicide is in fact femicide. We must recognize the sexual politics of murder. From the burning of witches in the past, to the more recent widespread custom of female infanticide in many societies, to the killing of women for ‘honor,’ we realize that femicide has been going on for a long time” (104). Though at the time Russell did not attempt an explicit definition of “femicide,” she and her collaborators proposed several in the following decades, which she enumerated in her 2009 article “Femicide: Politicizing the Killing of Females:” “the killing of women because they are women;” “the murder

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3 A document issued in 2012 by the Pan American Health Organization, the regional office of the World Health Organisation, and available at their web site entitled “Understand and Addressing Violence Against Women,” focuses “on the narrower definition commonly used in policies, law and research.”

The WHO also promoted, with PATH, the Inter-American Alliance for the prevention of Gender-based Violence (Intercambios) and The Medical Research Council of South-Africa, the conference “Strengthening Understanding of Femicide: Using Research to Galvanize Action and Accountability,” held in Washington DC in April 2008. An “overview” of the conference was published the following year, with the same title, in which were contained two crucial articles to the understanding of the story of the conceptualisation of “femicide” by Monique Widyono and by Russell herself, who was also the key-note speaker at the conference. The latter’s article is significant in the context of the present discussion also for other reasons. In it, Russell recounts how she originally came by the term, and decided to adopt it, and how she later found out that it was not a modern coinage.

of women by men motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women’,” motivations which may be generically termed sexism; and finally, “the killing of females by males because they are female” (27).

Prior to that date, her most structured attempt to outline the political implications of the concept had been the article “Femicide: Sexist Terrorism Against Women,” which she coauthored with Jane Caputi in 1992, in which femicide and rape were represented as crimes determined by the same kind of patriarchal political motivations. Femicide was, like rape, “the direct expression of sexual politics, an act of conformity to masculinist sexual norms (...), and a form of terrorism that serves to preserve gender status quo,” which they felt should be distinguished from “murders targeting women,” which is very nearly a paraphrase of the dictionary definition (14-15).<sup>4</sup> “When the gender of the victim is immaterial to the perpetrator,” Russell later explained, “we are dealing with a non-femicidal murder” (Russell, “Femicide: Politicizing” 28). Russell’s concept of femicide also adds to the specification of the gender of the victim, coded in the strictly etymological definition, the specification of the gender of the aggressor.

Looking back on Russell’s work with the concept of femicide, Monique Widyono writes in “Conceptualizing Femicide” (2009) that: “She intended to highlight femicide in the context of unequal gender relations and the notion of male power and domination over women (8-9). In other words, Russell regarded femicide not so much as an individual crime, but as a collective crime, the consequence of a political fact, gender inequality. This politisation of the crime tends to dilute the agency of the crime, which is ultimately ascribed to the male oppressor, in the abstract, rather than the individual perpetrator.

Russell, however, thought it necessary to counteract the generalising tendency of her original definition by some additional restrictions, which emphasised individual agency. For example, for the “deaths of women resulting from male acts of power and domination, including, for example,

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4 According to the *OED*’s definition, of course, the term “femicide” applies to the killing of a woman even when it does not qualify as murder.

women who die from AIDS or female genital mutilation” (Widyono, “Conceptualizing” 11), which her original definition was not specific enough to exclude, she proposed the alternate term “mass femicide.” This additional restriction allowed her to separate such broad consequences of patriarchal domination from the deliberate killing of women for sexist reasons, to which the term femicide should be restricted. Moreover, though, theoretically, a female could be the perpetrator of “femicide,” abstractly understood as a killing that enforces dominant masculinist politics, Russell preferred to appropriate the word “femicide” exclusively to crimes perpetrated by males, and proposed the term “female-on-female murder” for “murders of females by females because they are females” (Russell, “Femicide: Politicizing” 29). The exact definition of “femicide” remains to this day the focus of a lively debate.

Russel, without doubt, was responsible for the introduction of the term “femicide” in the vocabulary of modern politics and philosophy. In 1976, in fact, Russell was convinced that she had been the first to use the word in public and accordingly made rhetorical use of the idea of priority: “femicide,” she then wrote, “has been going on for a long time. But since it involves females, there was no name for it until Carol Orlock invented the word ‘femicide’” in 1975 (Russell and Van de Ven, *Crimes Against Women* 104)<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, at the time the International Tribunal for Crimes Against Women was held, in 1976, Russell thought the term had been invented by Orlock, but by 1990 she recognised she had been mistaken:

When Harnes was looking for articles on femicide for our book, *Femicide in Global Perspective*, she stumbled across the third edition of a short book entitled *The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide*, published in 1827, and authored by William Macnish, who wrote about his seduction, impregnation, abandonment, and murder of a young woman. This led to the next surprising discovery: the term femicide was first

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5 “I first heard the word *femicide* in 1975, when an acquaintance told me that an American writer, Carol Orlock, was preparing an anthology on femicide. Although her book was never published, the term resonated with me powerfully as one that was needed to refer to sexist murders of females by males” (Russell, “Femicide: Politicizing” 27).

used in 1801 in the British publication *The Satirical Review of London at the Commencement of the Nineteenth Century* to signify ‘the killing of a woman.’ And according to the 1989 edition of the *OED*, which defined femicide in an identical way, the term femicide appeared in Wharton’s *Law Lexicon*, in 1848, suggesting that it had become a prosecutable offense.

Despite Harmes’ discovery of this brief history of the term femicide, I was not tempted to substitute the dictionary definition for my own, because I was, and still am, convinced that the sexist aspect of most murders of females by males needs to be incorporated into the definition of femicide. (Russell, “Femicide: Politicizing” 29)

Russell writes as if the dictionary definition were incompatible with hers. I think this assumption is conceptually unsound. The dictionary is descriptive in nature, not normative. It registers, that is, the senses in which particular words have been used in what its authors consider to be the corpus of the language; it does not prescribe rules for their use. And then, of course, a dictionary does not exhaust, nor does it purport to exhaust, the semantic possibilities, much less the political undertones of a term. Reading her text, we also get the impression that awareness of the political implications of “femicide” came suddenly to our enlightened time. She recognises, that is, that the term had not been “invented” by Orlock, as she had supposed, but implies that this was immaterial for her purposes. The term, she supposed, referred to a sort of violence to the political implications of which the people who first gave it currency were blind. As it turns out, the facts are much more complex than Russell’s grossly inaccurate “brief history” suggests

The “invention” of a new word responds to a necessity of expression. One must assume the writers who “invented” the term had themselves felt that the language had no word to express the meaning they intended. In this case, specifically, the “invention” of a gendered term bespeaks the writers’ conviction that available non-gendered terms like “murder” and “homicide” were too broad for their purposes. This in turn suggests that they were concerned that the sex of the victims was not

being adequately considered, and also that they intended to correct this. Thus far, at least, they must have agreed with Russell. I believe the scholar's job is precisely to inquire into the cultural perceptions that determine such significant choices, in order to avoid the sort of tempting generalisation that informs the previous quotation. The anxieties that motivated this nineteenth-century "invention" of femicide were not and could not possibly be the same that determined its reinvention in the twentieth century, but the contrast is not nearly as stark as Russell assumed it to be. Indeed, the assumption that awareness of the political implications of "femicide" came suddenly and at once to our enlightened time is informed by a simplistic understanding of the life of ideas. Russell's concept may have been new, but it must have had its antecedents. Indeed, her handling of the matter obscures what may be termed the pre-history of the idea of femicide.

Harmes's "discoveries," all three of them, are precisely the three texts quoted by the *OED*'s two entries for the form, which Russell dismisses as a matter of course. Or they would be if "William Macnish" and *The Satirical Review* were not misreadings<sup>6</sup>. I will start by the second. The *OED* quotes from a *book* published in 1801 entitled not "The Satirical Review of London," but *A Satirical View of London at the Commencement of the Nineteenth Century* by "An Observer." There the term is employed figuratively in reference to the seduction of "virgins:" "This species of delinquency may be denominated *femicide*; for the monster who betrays a credulous virgin, and consigns her to infamy, is in reality a most relentless murderer!" (60).<sup>7</sup> The passage presupposes, without questioning it, the privileged position of the male in human sexuality, as socially and culturally construed in a patriarchal society. According to this distinctly sexist outlook, a single woman who engages in sexual intercourse is a fallen woman—she is, to use a modern colloquialism—damaged goods. Femicide denotes here that fate "worse than death" that respectable young ladies were taught to fear. This sentimental common place, which presupposes the helplessness of women,

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6 Russell's phrasing and her footnote convey the erroneous impression that the definition "the killing of a woman" is a quotation from the earliest known use of the word; in fact, Russell quotes the *OED*'s definition itself.

7 Subsequent editions of this successful book, which reached its fourth edition by 1809, identified its author as John Corry.



is embodied in such landmarks of sentimental literature as Richardson's *Clarissa*, where the female protagonist dwindles and dies after losing her "honor" to Lovelace. The indignation of the "Observer" is clearly not aimed at male privilege *per se*, but at the man who abuses it, the infamous seducer, of which Lovelace was the type. This use of "femicide" does not require any significant revision of Russell's historical sketch. But what if the seducer decided to truly and literally kill his "conquests?"

This dreadful prospect is acted out in *The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide*, the original femicide story I mentioned above, and here the distortion resulting from Russell's account is far from negligible. First, the title does not refer, as she implies, to the killing, but to the killer—it is the criminal, not the crime, that goes "unexecuted." Strictly speaking, therefore, this is not the word employed by Russell. Indeed, this little book is quoted by the *OED* as the earliest known instance of the *other* meaning of "femicide," "one who kills a woman" (entry 1). As the title indicates, the narrator confesses he murdered a woman—Mary Elliston, who was pregnant with his child. However, "William Macnish" is not the author of book; he is a mistake. The name is a mash-up of the name of the author, Robert Macnish, correctly identified by the *OED*, and the name of the fictional narrator, "William M\*\*r, Esq. of —, in the County of Stirling, Scotland."

Thus, Russell and Harmes were taken in by a very elaborate hoax. The author not only omitted his name from the original publication—the authorship would not be publicly divulged until 1838, after Macnish's death—, but, to further the ruse, permitted the story to circulate under the truncated name of the narrator, as if he were a real person, with a real family whose privacy had to be protected. The story was prefaced by an excerpt from the narrator's will, determining its posthumous publication, which contributed to the air of truth. And the story was plausible enough. No one seems to have thought it very unlikely that a seducer would kill a poor "conquest" to avoid scandal, or that this crime could go unpunished. Yet, this was not an honest hoax.

The narrative was accompanied by several para-textual indications that were clearly designed to tip the knowing reader off. One such indication was the tell-tale disclaimer which preceded all editions of the narrative: “No fiction.”<sup>8</sup> No factual narrative, or intended as such, has ever been accompanied by such an obtrusive denial of its fictional nature, which actually prompts the reader to doubt. Indeed, the hoax would have been much more credible without this disclaimer—evidently, full credence was not the author’s design, who seems rather to have actively sought to discredit his fictional cover.

The disclaimer suggests that the femicide was a persona assumed by the anonymous author. The sophisticated reader was used to this sort of mask play, which the famous *Blackwood* magazine had brought into fashion. Indeed, “the projection of a deliberately created magazine persona was one of the dominant journalistic conventions of the age,” and one which Poe adopted early on (Allen, *Poe and the British Magazine Tradition* 34) and so, most of the essays published in *Blackwood* were, strictly speaking, fictions, in the sense that contributors did not only write under pseudonym, but assumed a fictional persona, such as the Ettrick Shepherd (James Hogg) or the Opium Eater (Thomas De Quincey). Such personas formed a kind of fictional framework for the magazine. The disclaimer suggested William the femicide was another kind of fictional persona, and this was all but confirmed, as we shall see, by the texts that accompanied the publication of the narrative in the English periodical press.

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8 I have not been able to obtain a copy of the first edition of the original pamphlet, but all of the many early editions which appeared in the British papers from August 1827 onward reproduce this disclaimer. The catalogue of the Library of the University of Edinburgh, which holds a copy of an early unspecified edition, dated 1827, of the pamphlet, specifically mentions the words “No Fiction” printed on the verso of the title page. Incidentally, the obscurity into which Macnish and his work have fallen have led the librarians to the mistaken conception that *Confessions* is a true story, as stated. This is indicated by their decision of filing the narrative under the tag “Murder – Scotland – Personal Narratives,” a mistake which may partly account for Russell’s (“The Confessions.” Library Record). Below I present the convoluted history of the publication of the tale in the periodical press in more detail.

The 1828 “fourth edition” of the original Macphun pamphlet, the earliest to which I have had access, does indeed carry the “No Fiction” disclaimer, mentioned by the Library of the University of Edinburgh in the verso of the title page. Page two contains a longer title, which stakes a more ambiguous claim of authenticity than any of the previous editions: “A Tale of Horror: Founded on Fact. The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide.”

Finally, the version of the tale included by D. M. Moir in his anthology of Macnish’s literary remains reproduces the disclaimer, below the title, between commas (see Moir, *The Modern Pythagorean* 69). There the title of the tale is altered to *The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide*, in compliance with Macnish’s own suggestion (see letter from Macnish to Moir transcribed below).

Not surprisingly, the real author of *Confessions*, Robert Macnish was closely associated to *Blackwood's*. As “The Modern Pythagorean” he contributed prose tales, verse, and even aphorisms to the magazine, and, less frequently, to other of the many literary magazines of the period, starting in 1826. Under his own name, he also published two relatively successful treatises on psychological subjects, *The Anatomy of Drunkenness* (1827) and *The Philosophy of Sleep* (1830), as well as an introduction to Phrenology.<sup>9</sup>

Within months of Macnish's death in 1837, his friend D. M. Moir published a collection of literary remains in two volumes, entitled *The Modern Pythagorean* (1838). The second volume was a collection of Macnish's tales that included *Confessions*; the first was a long literary biography of Macnish, interspersed with cullings from his correspondence with the editor, as well as some of his poems. This was the first time Macnish's name was publicly linked with his literary persona, and also, as far as I could ascertain, the first time the secret of the authorship of *Confessions* was published. Macnish told the whole story to Moir, whom he had met for the first time the previous month, in a letter dated August 13, 1827, the first of many he would write him. The relevant passages are transcribed in *The Modern Pythagorean*:

I also sent you a whimsical affair of mine, which is just out. It has been published with its ridiculous title, merely for the purpose of creating a sensation, and make the Glasgow folks stare a little. The strictest secrecy is preserved with regard to the authorship, which is solely confined to the knowledge of the publisher, and one or two others. (Moir, *The Modern Pythagorean* 1:50)

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9 The first of these books was published originally in Glasgow with the title *The Anatomy of Drunkenness: An Inaugural Essay* in 1827, by Macphun of Glasgow, Macnish's habitual publisher, who in the following year published a heavily revised second edition, “enlarged to more than the double the size of the former.” The title was also shortened to *The Anatomy of Drunkenness*, and a dedicatory to “Delta,” Moir's literary pseudonym, who would later become Macnish's literary executor, was added. In the same year, the “1st American Edition, from the 2d London [sic] Edition” appeared. The fifth Macphun edition, of 1834, was the last during Macnish's lifetime, but was reprinted several times during the two following decades.

*The Philosophy of Sleep* was first published in 1830, also by Macphun, and was equally successful. Continuing demand justified a second edition in 1834 and a third in 1836, both of which were overseen by the author, who revised and made additions to the text. In 1845, long after Macnish's death, Macphun made a final printing of the book, after which interest in it seems to have faded. In 1977, however, Daniel Robinson prepared a new edition of the book—the first in more than a century.

Moir confirms the “affair” in question was the *Confessions*, which had been published sometime before,<sup>10</sup> and did create the sensation its author intended. In October 2, less than two months after its initial publication, Macnish tells his friend “My Femicide, or Feminicide, as it should have been, has gone through a second edition, and a third will be probably required” (Moir, *The Modern Pythagorean* 1:57).<sup>11</sup> He adds: “I am not sure that it is a very creditable thing to trick the public, as has been done by this pamphlet. I, however, stand acquitted of anything mercenary, for I gave the manuscript to Macphun to make a kirk and mill if he liked of it” (1:50). Moir shared his friend’s uneasiness regarding the legitimacy of tricking the public with a yarn like *Confessions*, of which he was indeed not too fond. Still, he had to confess the hoax was skillfully managed and a great success in its kind: “It was a most truculent story; but the tone of truth is so well sustained throughout, that it took to a miracle” (1:51).

This “tone of truth” and the secrecy observed by all involved no doubt contributed decisively to create the confusion that surrounds the authorship of *Confessions* to this day, but other fortuitous circumstances obscured the matter still further. Macnish died unexpectedly in 1837, at the age of 34, at a time when he was still struggling to make a name for himself as a creative writer. The popularity of his scientific output proved a little more enduring than that of the tales of “The Modern Pythagorean,” but not much. Karl Miller, one the very few scholars that has dealt with Macnish’s work, wrote in 1975 that Macnish “was once quite well known” but “has since virtually disappeared from view,” and that his stories, in particular, have completely “sunk from view” since the time of their greatest popularity (203, 216).

All this has made it easier for Russell and her collaborators to be taken in by Macnish’s “trick,” and integrate the *Confessions* into their overriding narrative. Femicide had been around long before people came up with a name for it. This was only another story of “seduction, impregnation,

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10 The earliest mention to the pamphlet I could locate, was in the August 11, 1827 issue of *The Ant*, a Glasgow Magazine, which suggests the pamphlet had appeared in the preceding Saturday, that is, exactly a week before (though the reference seems to me a little ambiguous on that point). The reference in question is quoted below.

11 In fact, the work had reached a fourth Macphun edition by 1828.

abandonment, and murder of a young woman” to be grouped under the “new” concept of femicide (Russell “Femicide: Politicizing,” 29). But this was not some ingenuous statement of fact. The femicide had, in a very real sense, been invented by Macnish. Russell, Harmes, and Caputi’s mistake highlights the fact that, although this particular story *did not* happen, it could have happened. But this is exactly the point Macnish was trying to make. This, then, was what was supposed to make people “stare,” as he put it. And his intuition proved flawless. For a while at least, he had people staring—and not only in Glasgow, but the whole United Kingdom.

A well-orchestrated campaign—what may be termed a publicity stunt—, probably designed by Macphun himself, ensured this. Starting on August 20, or perhaps a few days earlier, roughly a week after Macnish revealed his new friend Moir the secret of *The Confessions*, two different versions of the tale, one complete in one installment, another divided in two parts, each with its own editorial note, surfaced almost simultaneously in Liverpool and London: in *The Albion*, *The Mercury*, and the *Kaleidoscope, or Literary and Scientific Mirror*, from the former, and in *The Standard* (which would later become *The Evening Standard*), and perhaps *The St. James Chronicle* from the latter.<sup>12</sup> Then followed in quick succession the *Saunders News-Letter*, the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, the *Tipperary Free Press*, the *Cumberland Pacquet*, the *Inverness Courier*, *The Atlas*, of London, *The Sun*, also from London (in its “Police Intelligence” section!), *Bell’s Life in London*, and *Sporting Chronicle* (oddly enough), and finally the *Pertshire Courier*, which ran the story in November 1, 1827. By this time the story was cooling off, but as late as May 16, 1828, the *Dublin Evening Mail* was still running it. Meanwhile, Macphun kept the market stocked with the pamphlet. All in all, the hoax was an enormous success. Of all Macnish’s short prose narratives, this was almost certainly the most widely divulged. However, very few at the time knew he had written

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12 *The Standard* of August 23 and *The Mercury* of the next day were the earliest newspaper publications of the entire tale and of its first half I could obtain. *The Mercury* was almost certainly the first newspaper to publish the entire tale. There are reports, however, that the *Albion* of Liverpool published the first part of the tale on August 20, and there is some evidence that suggests that it appeared originally in the *St. James Chronicle*. I discuss the circumstances of the publication of *The Confessions* in detail in the following pages. I refer the reader to the Appendix containing a chronology of the publication of the tale.

the story, or even that the author was The Modern Pythagorean who had written some tales for *Blackwood*. By the time Moir divulged the secret, the story was more than a decade old, and almost entirely forgotten.<sup>13</sup> Thus, *Confessions*, which was a fairly obscure matter even in its day, was, over time, shrouded under a mist of misunderstanding. As a consequence, the influence his story had on contemporary writers became invisible.

I say that Macnish invented the femicide. He thought that his character was distinct enough to require a new name. The author's hesitation between "femicide" and "feminicide" in the title, indeed, testifies that he considered the term a neologism, or at least thought that it was not well-established in the language. This strongly suggests that he too felt that the kind of violence he depicted in the tale, which Russell herself admits falls into the modern definition of femicide, had to be named. This naming is itself a political gesture. The fact that William the femicide's story perfectly matches Russell's definition of femicide, indeed, is the result of deliberate choices on the author's part, choices that bespeak his intention of exposing precisely what Russell calls the "sexist aspect" of femicide. Thus, the rhetoric of the fiction undermines the rhetoric of the narrator.

Like all fictional characters, the femicide is patterned after real people. Yet, although he may represent, in many ways, the patriarchal ideology common in his time, this was an effect wrought by Macnish, who evidently did not feel the character represented his views, his attitudes, or his feelings. Coded in the text, therefore, is the distance between the author and his narrator. The role of the critic is to attempt to gauge this distance.

Macnish's invention, of course, is not without its precedent in fiction. As I have before mentioned, its ancestors are the terrible male tyrants of the Gothic, who imprisoned and harassed women, typically in some decrepit old castle, to force them to comply to their wishes. Indeed, the Gothic disguise allowed a certain degree of license to Ann Radcliffe and her imitators that was not granted the writers who set their fiction in the present. In her novels, most notably in *The Mysteries*

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<sup>13</sup> I provide a chronology of the publication of *Confessions* in the Appendix. This is not an exhaustive list, and is presented merely for reference purposes.

of *Udolpho*, she hints at the notion of femicide, that is, the killing of women by man for sexist reasons within the framework of an extreme patriarchal society. Indeed, she tantalises the reader with suggestions of the deed, only to swerve from it in the last moment, usually by some preposterous coincidence that provides an alternate explanation for the suggestive circumstances that pointed toward the crime. Jane Austen, in her *Northanger Abbey* (1817), burlesques this strategy of suspense, where the imagination of the novel-reading heroine leads her to apprehend terrible, but inexistent crimes. Thus, Radcliffe obeys a very strict code of decorum. The heroine of the novel is never killed. On the contrary, she is rewarded for her trials with at least a nominally happy ending.

Few Gothic novels challenge these rules of Gothic decorum, and none as egregiously as Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*. Under pretence of exposing the distortion of character wrought on the protagonist by a monastic life of celibacy and self-denial, Lewis has the hypocritical monk Ambrosio, commit femicide—twice. The Gothic dealt in the cultural taboos of incest, sexual violence, and matricide, or more precisely, in hinting of their possibility, without ever realising it. The monk goes one step further, for his victims are his mother and sister, the latter of whom he also rapes. Thus, he enacts all those familial horrors which had only been hinted at in Radcliffe's novels. Lewis also swerved from her ideologically reassuring didacticism, which greatly scandalised many of his contemporaries. The evil male tyrant is the focus of the tale, which had never been the case in Radcliffe's novels, which are always focused on the female victim of his cruelty until *The Italian* (1797), which is itself a reply to Matthew Lewis's scandalous novel. And then, Antonia, the monk's sister, whose role matches that of Radcliffe's heroines, is not providentially saved from the horrors they had apprehended, and ends up being raped and murdered.

The Gothic, of course, as its name implies, was set in an epoch that was ostensibly distinguished from the present, and which was conventionally associated with superstition, particularly the belief in ghosts and apparitions. This effect of cultural distance is sometimes

achieved by setting the tale in some “Oriental” setting—William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786) is the most famous example of this Oriental Gothic. Usually, however, the novels are set in the context of unreformed Christianity. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, however, another form of fiction appeared which was not strictly speaking Gothic, but developed from it and tapped on the same cultural anxieties. Thus, novels such as William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794), which are often classified as Gothic, were set in present-day England. The American novelist Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), who considered himself Godwin’s disciple, wrote several novels in this style. The femicide story follows this trend of transferring Gothic horrors to a contemporary setting.<sup>14</sup>

Among Brockden Brown’s novels, *Wieland* (1798) is particularly important for our purposes, as it provides a link between William the femicide and Lewis’s monk. The eponymous character of the novel is a man who kills his wife and children in obedience to what he believes was a divine commandment. In chapter XVIII, Clara, the protagonist’s sister, could not believe that her brother killed his family. Her, and *Wieland*’s, uncle then tells her: “Thou art anxious to know the destroyer of thy family, his actions, and his motives. Shall I call him to thy presence, and permit him to confess before thee? Shall I make him the narrator of his own tale?” (Brown, *Wieland* 151). He then presents to her a transcription of the killer’s confession, which occupies most of the next two chapters. Thus, by adopting the subjective perspective of the uxoricide, Brockden Brown foreshadows the femicide story,

However, in the novel, the femicide is not permitted to be the *sole* narrator of his tale. But *Wieland*’s uncle’s question implies a challenge. What if the reader were to be left alone with the femicide, and be strictly confined to his subjective outlook? The femicide, of course, laments what he has done, and feels the horror of his deed. The image of his agonising wife still haunts him. Yet,

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14 Mary Wollstonecraft’s posthumous *Mary, Or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798) should also be mentioned. There she openly portrays the danger of death involved in rudimentary techniques of abortion to which single women were compelled to subject themselves, and even has the protagonist’s female baby die as a result of the mother’s confinement in a madhouse by her husband.



he feels himself justified. In his view, it was his duty to kill her, no matter how he felt about it. Of course, in *Wieland*, his perspective is contrasted with others, and this makes his superstition apparent. This superstition is something he has in common with Ambrosio the monk, and, by and large, all Gothic villains. In Macnish's femicide story, however, the reader must scrutinise the narrator's character, and form his own judgment of his character without help from the author.

Can the reader trust William? What kind of character is he? In what does his perspective differ from that of the author? Is he fundamentally different from the average, normal reader? Is the narrator really a reformed femicide, as he claims, or is his outlook constitutionally femicidal? Indeed, the rejection of the reassuring Gothic fiction that the male tyrant was the result of superstitions that had been exploded in modern societies suggests the question may not be merely academic. Would the reader, that is, be able to detect the femicide before he killed? These questions are as pressing as they are disturbing.

Indeed, William's deed, inasmuch as it goes against all accepted moral codes, brings his statements under suspicion. He sounds calm and collected. In fact, most of the time, he sounds like a normal male writer of his time. The sentimental clichés he deploys to describe the two main female characters, his victim and lover Mary Elliston and his sister Eliza, were characteristic of the fiction of the era—they would not be out of place in any of the many conventional tales of love and loss that filled the magazines. Yet, such passages as the following, though they would otherwise be perfectly unremarkable, being put in the mouth of the suspicious femicide character become themselves suspect:

I know not how it was, but this pure-minded and intellectual girl conceived for me a strong affection. God knows, there was little in my society to attract the love of any one, and, above all, of such as she. I never did her an act of kindness. I scarcely ever spoke to her with common civility; yet, strange to say, I unknowingly gained her heart, and she loved me at last as if I had been the most deserving object upon earth.

How my grovelling soul came to be invested with such power, remains a problem which I have never been able to solve. In all other respects, the mind of Mary was pure and heavenly. That spirit so full of poetry and romance—that mild enthusiastic spirit, conversant only with lofty thoughts, and whose existence had passed in a world of fancy and feeling—how did it descend from its high estate to seek companionship with a base earth-born heart like mine. In this only she erred—in this only she showed that tinge of humanity which clings to all below.

(Macnish, *Confessions* 11)

This is a perfectly orthodox specimen of a kind of sentimentality that was common in the early nineteenth-century. His own merely “male” unworthiness attests the passive “female” virtues of his lover, whom he exalts right out of this world. The ideal woman of most fiction of that time was characterised by forbearance and selfless abandonment to a male lover who was also typically represented as being unworthy of her. Considering the speaker killed this woman, however, the double bind to which this sort of gallantry holds her is not as harmless as it otherwise might have seemed. Indeed, William interprets this double-bind rather literally. Ideally considered, woman is superior to man, according to his exaggerated masculinist rhetoric, because she has no interest in sex, and only as long as she remains chaste. Man, on the other hand, is tacitly represented as being incapable of restraining his sexual impulses.

Woman, then, once she “stoops” from her impossibly “lofty” position, falls below the dignity of humanity—she is lost. Therefore, she is condemned to be either above or below “humanity.” How could, the appalled femicide wonders, the female spirit of purity stoop to physical love? In so doing, Mary showed her nature was tainted, as he puts it, with “humanity.” In contrast, it is only “human” for man to pursue sexual desire. Hence, whereas his human status is a given, woman is never, strictly speaking, conceived as a full human being—she must either be a body without soul, or a soul without body.

The idea, implied in the foregoing passage, that women come from heaven and cannot last long after their “descent” to earth, may be regarded as the peculiar superstition of the femicide. This is the idea that underlies all his actions and attitudes both before and after the killing of the “unchaste” Mary Elliston. Indeed, although, unlike Wieland, William is not overtly depicted as such, Macnish coaxes the reader to conclude that he is a superstitious man; that is, to realise that his representations of ideal womanhood are fundamentally out of touch with reality, and therefore tend, by their very nature, to femicide. William himself renders this superstition with epigrammatic terseness when he recalls his mother’s death. The spirit “of woman is like the dew of heaven upon the flower, and is melted away by the breath of misfortune” (Macnish, *Confessions* 8).<sup>15</sup> Married women, of course, are considered chaste according to the common patriarchal ideology to which he appeals—the marriage vow sanctifies sexual intercourse by channelling it to the culturally accepted end of procreation. At the same time, her death is offered as confirmation of William’s overriding superstition. Whereas the unchaste woman is sacrificed for her “humanity,” the chaste woman must die in order to confirm she is too good for this world, that is, above “humanity.” To confirm, that is, her indifference to sensual pleasure.

Thus, although we are never told William is superstitious, he himself betrays a sort of superstition that we are given to understand is peculiar to the femicide. In this sense, I would argue that the femicide is still fundamentally a Gothic character. The Gothic is often described in terms of the contrast between superficial pseudo-historical “trappings” and profound meanings, however, it may also be described, I believe more productively, in terms of a tension between superstition and rationality, which is dramatised by the contrast between the views of the superstitious characters and those of the author, which may or may not be represented explicitly in the text by an enlightened character of third-person non-participant narrator. In Radcliffe’s widely-imitated formula, the voice

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15 Morella, in Poe’s tale of the same name, invokes a similar conception of gender in her death-bed address to her husband: “It is a fair day for the sons of earth and life—ah, more fair for the daughters of heaven and death!” (232). The irony in these words is apparent. Morella will proceed to curse her husband before she dies. I argue below that this narrator was one of Poe’s first femicides.

of reason always makes itself heard, against superstition—this is what is known as the supernatural explained.

In Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1767), universally considered the first Gothic novel, the author craftily concealed himself from the reader behind a Gothic mask. In this sense, *Otranto* may be said to represent an extreme "Gothicism," that was considerably mitigated in Radcliffe's novels. Walpole's original preface explained that the premise, in the vulgar modern sense of the word, of his "romance" was the strict adherence to the superstition which was supposed to prevail in the time in which the narrative takes place. In the first edition, Walpole had not yet assumed the authorship, and presented his work as an anonymous translation from a sixteenth-century Italian original. The "solution of the author's motives," Walpole wrote, with his tongue in his cheek,

is (...) offered as a mere conjecture. (...) Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events, are exploded now even from romances. That was not the \ case when our author wrote (...). Belief in every kind of prodigy was so established in those dark ages, that an author would not be faithful to the manners of the times, who should omit all mention of them. He is not bound to believe them himself, but he must represent his actors as believing them. (*Otranto* 17-18)

In this sense, the Gothic implied from the start the assumption of a superstitious persona. In other words, the author simulated beliefs he did not share. Of course, the suggestion that the "author" did not share the superstition of his time, being conspicuously anachronistic, playfully hinted that the "romance" was of modern invention. The reader who heeded these signs, of course, understood perfectly the nature of the game. One would have to "conjecture" the "motives of the author," distinguishing him from the superstitious mask he had chosen to adopt. In this sense, therefore, the Gothic was a play of masks. Considering this mask as the defining characteristic of the Gothic, one might say that *Confessions*, although lacking the picturesque trappings of olden

times and faraway places that are usually identified with it, is nonetheless closer to the original spirit of the Gothic “romance” than the typical Gothic novel.

The author of *Confessions* intimates his narrator’s superstition, indeed, by the few means the severe formal constraints he imposes himself left him. These include stretching the character’s otherwise culturally acceptable views to the most extreme fundamentalist lengths, and making him appear as much of a depraved scoundrel as he could without immediately giving up the game. The following will illustrate my meaning. Even as he makes his confession, William still blames Mary for yielding to his advances, despite admitting that he most dishonorably tricked her: “But how was my poor, hard conquest gained? By a proceeding the iniquity of which no language can characterise. I invoked the MOST HIGH to witness that my future intentions were honourable; and swore, in the name of all that is sacred, to make her my own. I never intended to keep my promise” (Macnish, *Confessions* 11).

His dishonesty, however, does not excuse her. According to William’s inflexible logic, woman must resist her “humanity,” which he regards as alien to her true “lofty” nature, even against such disloyal attacks. In fact, he implies that it is the man’s role to tempt her, in order to test her virtue. Thus, although she is only allowed a passive role in it, woman has everything to lose in the rigged game of seduction. Her loss, however, is the gain of the man who seduces her who, no matter how treacherous, is credited a “conquest,” as William significantly insists to call Mary even after he killed her.

In essence, William’s views are certainly not extravagant—which partly explains the success of the hoax. Many contemporary men who did not kill women thought, felt, and spoke essentially like him. Most were not as extreme in their convictions, but the distinction is a very fine line indeed, and one which could easily get overlooked. And that is precisely Macnish’s point. He *chose* to have a femicide enunciate sentimental commonplaces to which his readers were used. And he tampered very little with these commonplaces. He knew, of course, that this would create a very strong

suggestion that the femicide is the potential consequence of the kind of sentimentality embodied by his character's discourse and, ultimately, of the gender politics they express. Thus, *Confessions* was clearly intended as an anatomy of femicide, or as an intellectual biography of the femicide, which brings into visibility the essential traits of his character. The femicide, of course, is not aware that femicide is inherent to his sensibility and way of thinking. And this, the fact that he could successfully fool himself and others as to his true nature, is what makes the femicide story disturbing.

William's sentimental clichés effectively carry the suspicion over to the public's side. Might not some of the men that speak almost exactly like him be potential femicides, and yet be able to conceal this even from themselves? The ominous "Extract from the Last Will and Testament" of the femicide which precedes the narrative suggests this may be the case: "It is my express wish, that the MS. in the lower drawer of my escritoir, entitled, 'The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide,'<sup>16</sup> be published to the world, (...) to the effect that others may be deterred from the commission of a similar sin, by the thought, that if they escape the punishment of the law, they are sure to meet with that of a racked and harrowed conscience" (Macnish, *Confessions* 3).

This is a tacit avowal that the punishment was unlikely, and therefore that the law was not effectually deterring men like William from committing femicide. All they had to fear was their conscience, and this is hardly reassuring. This in turn affords a very good clue of the author's intentions in writing the hoax. The point he appears to have been making is typical of sensationalist press, that an ineffective legal establishment is creating the conditions in which criminals may thrive. In this particular case, the laws of matrimony, which granted husbands absolute power over their wives and their property—which, incidentally, women only in very specific circumstances were legally entitled to control—, actually added a financial incentive to William's crime.

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16 As we have seen, Moir altered the title of the tale in his edition in accordance with a suggestion by Macnish himself. See note 14 above.

Mary Elliston, the woman William seduced with false promises of marriage, was a destitute orphan his father had taken in and raised with his own children. Although he was sexually attracted to her, he did not think of her as a suitable bride for a man of his position, and therefore never intended to marry her. When she became pregnant, in fact, he started courting a rich heiress of the neighborhood. At the time, he tells us, he concealed Mary's pregnancy, not out of shame, but purely as a matter of convenience, or more precisely, to secure his financial interests:

I cared little for exposure, on the score of honour or virtue, but I dreaded it on that of self-interest. Let me get possession of my object—let her [the unnamed prospective bride's] wealth be once fairly secured in my iron hand—and my shame, for aught I cared, might be trumpeted to the uttermost ends of the earth. But till then—till that decisive—that irrevocable moment, it behoved that all should wear the aspect of integrity. (Macnish, *Confessions* 13)

This “irrevocable moment” is, of course, the wedding, in which a woman's wealth became, for all practical purposes, her husband's. In those days, once married “a woman was irretrievably bound to her husband regardless of his behavior” (Sapiro, *A Vindication* 149). Even in cases of infidelity or physical abuse, and indeed even when the husband evidently posed a threat to the wife's life, she was not likely to be granted a divorce.

In those days, therefore, femicide was far more likely to be rewarded than punished. At least, this is what William thought, which means that the law, in his case, actually constituted an inducement to the crime. Femicide was, indeed, a very real concern in Macnish's time. The apparently demure “Gothic” novels of the best-selling Ann Radcliffe constantly kept before the public's eye how utterly at the mercy of men women were. Indeed, although dislocated to exotic settings, her plots were perfectly and sadly probable in England. In fact, her happy endings could not much allay the unsettling anxieties in which she dealt. A tragic outcome, the reader could not help but realise, was much more probable than the marvelous train of coincidences that saved her

heroines. Macnish goes one step further. Not only does he portray an actual femicide, but by making the “irrevocable” nature of the marriage contract a factor in his hero’s calculations, Macnish deliberately forces on the reader the realization that the law makes it worth his while to cover-up his previous indiscretion with Mary Elliston by whatever means necessary. The crime did involve the risk of punishment, but that risk was balanced by the well-founded prospects of enrichment that made the gamble tempting.

Initially, William merely intended to keep Mary in hiding until his wedding, but a vague threat of disclosure in a letter she sends him persuades him to take more energetic measures to defend his financial interests. I find it significant that the sentence that sealed Mary’s fate should also contain an appeal to female gender consciousness, and a call for solidarity between the victims of male abuse: “I know you are addressing another, but if she has the spirit of a woman, never will she listen to you after what you have done to me” (Macnish, *Confessions* 14). William reacts with indignation, and immediately forms the resolution of killing her. Coolly and with premeditation, the femicide procures a dagger and rushes to the out-of-the-way country estate where he kept his pregnant lover in hiding:

While she clung to my bosom, and called me her own—while her deep melting eyes were thrown so expressively on my savage countenance,—yes, the deed was then done—done at the moment when any heart, but that of a demon, would have been disarmed. I drew slowly the dagger from my pocket, and—my spirit shudders while I relate it—stabbed her in the back! A shriek, and she fell to the earth.

(16)

Macnish could not have done more to counteract the reader’s natural tendency to empathise with a first-person serious narrator. Here depicted is, according to the very sentimental conventions to which William himself appeals, the most moving spectacle conceivable. Surely, there must be something wrong with a man that can listen unmoved to such appeals, and carry out his murderous



resolve. The circumstances are, furthermore, of the most aggravated nature: he stabs this woman in the back.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his ideology, however, William was himself so awed by the horror of the deed he had committed that he becomes delirious as he flies the scene of the crime: “a thousand phantoms and forms of darkness seemed to dance before my eyes. I was pursued with unutterable despair, while a voice like that of my murdered victim rung incessantly in my ears, ‘Spare me—spare my unborn babe!—pity, pity, pity.’ I stopped them, but in vain: the same sound, the same agonizing voice, pursued my footsteps wherever I went” (Macnish, *Confessions* 17). The fact that the murderer “stops” his ears, shows us that his guilty conscience was evoking the last words of his victim.

The raving William eventually finds his way home, but the phantom of his victim follows him there: “I went to bed, but for my eyes there was no rest. The night was horrible—inexpressibly horrible. The torments of hell took possession of me, and I rolled and tossed about in delirious agony. A vision came before me—it was the pale spirit of Mary—the same which has nightly haunted me since that awful hour” (Macnish, *Confessions* 17). Indeed, the ghost makes its appearance punctually at ten o’clock every night—the hour at which the crime took place. Shortly thereafter, William is tried for the murder of Mary Elliston, but, though the crime was “too evident to admit of doubt in any mind,” it could not be proved in court, owing to the testimony of two servants who “swore an *alibi* in my favour” (20, 19). The defendant is then narrowly acquitted by the jury, and begrudgingly dismissed by the judge.

Although the financial motive is plausible enough, the events in the second part of the tale suggest that it is a rationalisation masking deeper motivations. The two poles of the femicide’s

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17 The crime itself resembles, both in the circumstances and the motive, that depicted in one of the most popular of the English “broadside ballads,” “The Gosport Tragedy, or, The perjured Ship-Carpenter.” The protagonist is also similarly haunted by the ghost of his pregnant lover. In the ballad, however, he speaks of the ghost to the captain of the ship who employed him after the crime, thus revealing his crime. The English Broadside Ballad Archive, of the University of Santa Barbara, holds digital copies of five different editions of the ballad, with the numbers 35483, 33259, 31213, 32460, and 33261.

dualistic dehumanised conception of womanhood, the lost “earthly” woman and the pure angelic-woman, are projected on the contrasting figures of Eliza, his sister, and Mary, his lover, respectively. After the death of her childhood friend, indeed, Eliza, guessing her brother had murdered her, “faded away like a flower beneath some pestilential vapour” and died (Macnish, *Confessions* 20). This language, through its similarity with the passage concerning the death of his mother, evokes the stereotype of the pure, ideal woman, who was too good to live long in the world of the flesh. Having died a virgin, of course, Eliza had not displayed that “taint” of humanity which lowered Mary in his estimation. Thus, the idea that she was more worthy than her is ingrained in the rhetoric of the tale.

Indeed, although he expresses remorse for having killed Mary, this remorse is highly ambiguous. For he implies that he regrets killing Mary not so much for her own sake, but mostly because this was the indirect cause of the death of his “pure” sister, whose life is implicitly valued over that of the “fallen” woman he had killed. Accordingly, he will eventually erect a monument to his sister’s memory—not Mary’s. In other words, we get the distinct feeling that it was somehow less wrong, as it were, to kill Mary than it was to kill Eliza, and this makes the femicide’s confession almost as morally repulsive as the crime itself. All his acts and feelings can be traced to the same femicidal superstition.

The opposition between the “fallen” lover and the “pure” sister, incidentally, reflects itself on the bipartite structure of the tale, which has two climaxes. The first of these is, of course, the murder of Mary Elliston itself. The second climax, which unites many loose ends in the narrative, hinting of a hidden motive for the crime, occurs during the wake of William’s beloved only sister, whom he unaccountably regards, completely dismissing Mary, as the only being who ever truly loved him: “Years have rolled away since that fatal parting; but it is yet fresh in my memory, and will remain uneffaced till life is extinguished within me. I sat by night in the room where her corpse

was laid out in its last mournful dress. (...) A halo of immortality seemed to float around her. Never to my eyes did death appear clothed in such beauty” (Macnish, *Confessions* 20).

William could hardly believe Eliza was dead: “I thought the expression of living nature was lurking within; but alas! the cold lip, the icy cheek, and the soulless eye, proclaimed that the flame of existence was quenched, and that the grave had triumphed” (Macnish, *Confessions* 20). Seen from afar, she looked to him like a live woman, and only closer inspection, and the touch of her cold skin, could at last persuade him that he was in the presence of a *bona fide* corpse. This will prove decisive in the sequence.

At this point, the narrator makes a most unusual decision:

Yes, poor Eliza! I shall do my last sad duty to thee at least with a sincere heart. I shall perform thy mournful wake alone. I shall weep in atonement and repentance for what I have done to thy gentle bosom. None shall hear me, unless, perchance, thy spirit, hovering nigh, may catch the tones of remorse and affliction from thy wretched brother. (Macnish, *Confessions* 21)

Considering Mary’s wake is not so much as mentioned, this lavishing of attention on *Eliza’s* wake is itself indecorous, as is the emphasis the femicide puts on his remorse for what he has done *to her*. But this is where things get really weird. William here decides to spend the night alone with the corpse, acknowledging that *he knew* at the time that no one could hear him. The reader should know William, though he would not admit it even to himself, had been madly in love with his sister for a long time—and I am not talking of brotherly love. He thought she was the most beautiful dead woman he had ever seen; this is not surprising, for he thought she was also the most attractive *live* woman he had ever laid eyes on. In fact, he thought she was perfect. He details her physical charms with rapture: “Poor Eliza! she was every thing that is amiable in woman. Fair, beautifully proportioned, and graceful in her movements, beyond even the most gifted of her sex—her light and airy form—her blue, deep-blue eye—her lip ever crossed with smiles, and her complexion clear as

heaven itself” (Macnish, *Confessions* 9). He evidently had much to say about his sister’s body. In fact, by stopping himself ostensibly from further description, he gives us reason to suspect he had *too much* to say. “Of all these things I could speak, but it avails not” (9). He *could*? If he had not mentioned it, one would never suspect he had not said all he had to say on the subject. Still, he says enough: “My sister had a form and a mind which fancy never excelled, even in her brightest dreams” (9).

But it is by favorably comparing her body, or “form,” to that of her friend Mary, his lover, that William provides the more embarrassing clues of his unconfessed desire for his sister. Mary “was tall and exquisitely made,” but “[h]er form wanted the richness and voluptuous swell of Eliza’s,” although “it was more airy, and, if possible, more graceful” (Macnish, *Confessions* 10). Evidently, William was more attracted to the “voluptuous” body of his sister to the “airiness” of Mary. And now, as he watched alone, the “voluptuous” dead body looked as perfect and desirable as ever.

As he surveys it, he “communicates” to this lovely body his decision of spending the night weeping “for what I have done to thy gentle bosom,” which, under the circumstances, is certainly not the best choice of words (Macnish, *Confessions* 21). Just moments before, William had left some “flowers, such as she was wont to love, upon her bosom: I plucked them,” he adds, “with my own hands and laid them there” (20). Presumably, it was then that he had had the opportunity of touching the cool skin of the dead woman—for he recognises that he was only satisfied that she was dead after he touched it. The literal “bosom” in this last sentence creates a sort of metonymical contamination which puts some flesh in the trite sentimental metaphor. The result is the suggestion that William was secretly—or not so secretly, as it turns out—aroused by touching the beautiful life-like “bosom” of his sister, and that the unconfessed intention of satisfying *post mortem* a desire which he had to repress while she was alive, but which he now found an opportunity of satisfying, lay at the bottom of his decision of “performing” the wake alone.

The stage is now set for what William regards as the great crisis in his life. What comes next will probably not be totally unfamiliar to the reader:

It was the fatal hour, and I remarked it not, so utterly was I occupied with my own meditations, but it passed not by undistinguished. It was the hour of ten—to me so full of sorrow and of crime. I heard it strike, and when looking intently on the body of my sister, I saw—no, it was not a phantom of imagination—I saw the pale and bleeding form of Mary. She was still the same as she had hitherto appeared to my eyes; but her visit seemed not to be for me, but for the corpse of her friend. She looked with unspeakable affection over it, and kissed it again and again. I was transfixed with fear and astonishment. I tried to weep; but I could not. I tried to speak; but my tongue was tied. I tried to move; but I remained stupified and bound to my seat, as if by enchantment. Then the form threw her arms around my sister, who got up to receive her embraces. The pale cheeks of the latter became flushed with primeval beauty—her eyes were re-animated and sparkled as bright as ever—her lips burst the silence which had enchained them—she spoke and smiled delighted, while she returned with ardour the embraces of her friend. I could stand it no longer: my heart was overwhelmed with joy, and I started up to clasp Eliza to my bosom. I threw my arms around her, and kissed her; but horror-struck, I shrunk back. My lips were laid upon her frozen cheeks—I had laid hold of her corpse. She lay stretched out in the shroud. The candle was fading in its socket, and the chamber of death, faintly illumined by its expiring glow, was more ghastly than ever. Where was the phantom? She had fled and left no token of her presence behind save the cry of ‘REPENT,’ the echo of which, like a knell of the dead, still rung in my ears! (Macnish, *Confessions* 21-22)

## 2 – Chasing the Ghost of Ligeia

Many readers who have never heard of Robert Macnish, but are acquainted with Poe's work, will probably find this picture oddly familiar, especially if I tell them that Eliza, whose freshly deceased body to which the narrator pays his solitary homage, had not only blue eyes, but also "yellow hair like streaks of sunshine," whereas the entombed Mary, whose phantom intrudes on his meditation, had "black and shining" hair and eyes "of the same complexion" (Macnish 74, 76). The basic outline of this scene perfectly matches that of the memorable, most mysterious finale of a much more famous tale, Poe's "Ligeia." There too the first-person male narrator recalls how he had watched the corpse of the blonde, blue-eyed Rowena, when he was visited by his former lover, a *taller*, slenderer woman, dark-haired and black-eyed, the lady Ligeia, who had been long dead and buried; he is also convinced that, upon the return of the dark lady, the corpse in the room was briefly reanimated. Furthermore, the mourner in Poe's tale—a most unusual circumstance in itself—also spends the night alone with the corpse, making sure that no one was within earshot.

The general outline is enough to guarantee that the scene would not be *completely new* to a reader who had read *Confessions*, especially considering how outrageously singular that general outline is. This parallelism is then reinforced by many minor similarities between the plots of the two stories, the feelings expressed by the narrators, and sometimes even by verbal echoes. However, this relationship has, as far as I know, never been detected and as a consequence the originality of Poe's "Ligeia" has been much overrated. Some striking similarities with contemporary tales have been noticed, which I will discuss later on, but they were not enough to dismiss the impression that the tale was fundamentally idiosyncratic. Most critics felt that it came almost entirely out of Poe's head, and that only his supposedly perverse genius could come up with something quite so startlingly unexpected. As it turns out, however, Poe had in fact been pilfering from a very obscure source. Despite this, his story is highly original, but not *absolutely* original.

There are very good reasons for the source of the tale never to have surfaced. By 1838, when *Ligeia* was originally published, the sensation created by Macnish's little hoax was long forgotten, and he himself was slowly but surely fading into obscurity. The few readers in England who came across Poe's tale in those days probably did not recall *Confessions*, and therefore would not have made the connection. For reasons I will presently explain, connected with the peculiar circumstances of its publication in America, Poe's first audiences were extremely unlikely to even have read the original femicide story in its entirety. In America, the tale, or more precisely the wake scene I transcribed at the end of the previous section, was not merely forgotten, but virtually unknown. By the time scholars became seriously interested in Poe's work, many years later, Macnish himself was, as we have seen, already almost completely forgotten.

Almost, but not quite. At least two Poe scholars, Maxwell Morton and Thomas Mabbott noticed some of Poe's tales distinctly resembled sketches Macnish had published in *Blackwood's*, but saw no evidence of the influence of *Confessions*, in particular, in Poe's work. Thus, the relationship between the two, which I believe constitutes evidence of Poe's imitation, eluded even the few Poe scholars who, being aware of Macnish's influence on the American writer may be supposed to have read both *Confessions* and "Ligeia." There is, however, ample and, in my opinion, indisputable evidence of the influence of *Confessions* on "Ligeia."

The evidence of which I speak, albeit indisputable, is not always readily apparent. This is owing to Poe's peculiar method of composition. He never imitated without introducing some significant variation on the original material, which allowed the conjecture that he and the author he imitated had merely hit on a similar idea, or that the imitation was involuntary. The wake scene in "Ligeia" is a good example. The resemblance with the scene in *Confessions* is striking, but so is the difference. The details, however, show that the imitation was nothing if not deliberate.

The evidence that, in my opinion, clinches the matter, are Poe's covert, or buried allusions not only to *Confessions*, but to many other sources from which he borrowed for "Ligeia," which I

regard as being paradigmatic of Poe's method. I use the term "buried allusion" I employ here was first used to describe Poe's technique by Burton R. Pollin in his analysis of Poe's *Brevities*. In his studies of the *Pinakidia*, and other similar works like the *Marginalia* and the *Suggestions*, which he joined together under that common heading, Pollin showed that one had to look beyond Poe's displays of "factitious erudition," and learn to trace them to their "buried sources," in order to get at the sense of these little notes, which depends not on the prestigious sources mentioned in the articles, but rather on a relatively small number of secondary sources from which Poe derived most of his abstruse lore and to which he leaves sly but effective clues (Introduction xii). The radical duplicity of Poe's rhetoric, Pollin argued, required a special kind of source study which focused on these "inferred sources," and regarded ostensible allusions as potentially misleading ("Sources and Borrowings" xxiii). The idea of "inferred sources" is not new. The novelty in Pollin's approach is that he treats such sources, or rather the hidden allusions to such sources, not as indexes of a process of association of which the writer may not have been aware, but rather as deliberate nods to the reader, designed to explode the pedantic persona he assumed. This is what I mean when I employ terms like buried, covert, or hidden allusions.

In his *Discoveries in Poe*, Pollin showed that Poe used the same method in his other work, notably in his fiction, and traced "the chain of circumstances which led Poe from one author to another or from one borrowed allusion to a second from the same source," attempting, as he puts it, "a summation in 'slow time'" of "Poe's much faster insights and his ingenious dexterity in handling sources" (Introduction vii). Moreover, Pollin masterfully exposed Poe's use of "buried sources" to carry a buried meaning, which often subverts the obvious one, while at the same time revealing the true sources of his inspiration, which are never stated. In fact, Pollin found out that Poe "buried private jokes—'jeux d'esprit' as he liked to call them," the process of exhuming which he described as follows: "It has been like playing against a powerful opponent who enjoys the sport and yet, half wishing to be downed, grandly throws away the victory with some interesting gesture" (*Discoveries*



in *Poe* ix). Later in the text, Pollin refers to this mechanism of misdirection as “the tricks that he [Poe] played upon the reader” (x). The same insight underlies Susan Amper’s statement that Poe’s great secret was that “he was kidding” (“Poe’s Darkest Secret”).

Poe played the same tricks in “Ligeia,” which may also be regarded as a literary puzzle. Indeed, the narrator of that tale, like most of Poe’s serious narrators, has much in common with the pedantic persona Poe assumed in the *Brevities*, in the sense that the sources to which he ostensibly alludes do not bring us any closer to the solution of the many mysteries of the tale. Poe, however, points the reader in the right direction, and away from the misleading ostensible allusions, using the technique he had perfect in the *Pinakidia*, *Marginalia*, and *Suggestions* series: covert allusion.

Poe, then, took the basic idea for “Ligeia” from Macnish’s *Confessions*. It too is a story of femicide, about a man who has the phantom of the dark lady he murdered constantly before his eyes, and suffers a delirium while veiling the corpse of his second, blonde and blue-eyed victim. Yet, as I said, this is not readily apparent. It takes some effort to recognise that this is the case—indeed, it takes some effort to extract any sense from the confusing, incoherent narrative Ligeia’s husband offers. The murder of the dark lady is the defining event in both tales, but in Poe’s, it is concealed. The narrator does not openly acknowledge the deed, but neither does he succeed in completely suppressing the clues that reveal it. Thus, although femicide is the decisive fact in his life, the word is never mentioned in the text. I am convinced this is the main reason why Morton and Mabbott, who in all likelihood read both tales, never did identify *Confessions* as the main source of “Ligeia.”

Macnish’s tale, however, is not the only buried source of “Ligeia.” The tale also includes nods to all the femicide stories I mentioned earlier. Some of these allusions, namely to Bulwer-Lytton’s and Dicken’s “madmen” stories have been identified by other scholars, others are here identified for the first time. Some of the more conventionally “Gothic” details in plot, setting, and even phraseology, can also be traced to such landmarks of the Gothic fiction out of which the

femicide story developed as Lewis's *The Monk*, Radcliffe's *The Italian*, and even to two of Walter Scott's novels, *Ivanhoe* (1820) and *Anne of Geierstein* (1828)—in which, incidentally, the influence of the Gothic, and of Radcliffe in particular, is very clear. There are also distinct echoes of "Wake Not the Dead," a vampire tale published in 1823 which has, apparently on mistaken assumptions, been identified as a translation of a German original by Ludwig Tieck.

Indeed, by tracing the many buried allusions in "Ligeia" to literary femicides and their Gothic ancestors one is enabled to delineate a very complete picture of the genealogy of the femicide story. Through such allusions, Poe displays his sense of tradition, and the extent of his readings in the field, which were perhaps unmatched in his generation. He also sets a new standard for poetic artistry. "Ligeia" is at the same time absolutely new, and shamelessly derivative. I believe it was Poe's intention to inscribe his work in the tradition of which his tale is the epitome, while displaying the ingenuity of his treatment of old themes and motives, in order slyly to highlight his deliberate work of combination. Indeed, through its complex patchwork of hidden allusions "Ligeia" defines the femicide story with a degree of self-awareness that is quite beyond anything his predecessors had done. In fact, in describing the genesis and development of the femicide story, I have merely followed Poe's hints; in other words, my description of the femicide story is, in more than one sense, nothing more or less than a close reading of "Ligeia."

Before we go any further, it is important to place Poe's peculiar way of handling sources in historical context. None of the many sources I have mentioned are named in "Ligeia," and the material Poe lifted from them is always altered in a way that makes it hard for the reader to detect it. Odd as this may appear to contemporary readers, Walter Scott, one of, if not the most successful writer of "prose romances" of Poe's time, followed the same practice. Coleman Oscar Parsons has shown conclusively that "Scott consciously altered his borrowings" ("Demonological Background" 604). In fact, in his *Journal*, Scott openly admits that this had given him an advantage over the competition:

Another thing in my favour, is that my contemporaries steal too openly. Mr [Horace] Smith has inserted in *Brambletye House* whole pages from Defoe's *Fire and Plague of London*.

“Steal! foh! a fico for the phrase—

Convey, the wise it call!”

When I *convey* an incident or so, I am at as much pains to avoid detection as if the offense could be indicted in literal fact at the Old Bailey. (1:275)

In his illuminating account of Scott's method, Parsons remarks that the “study of Scott's narrative borrowing is made even more difficult by his practice of interweaving material from widely different sources—‘old and odd books, and a considerable collection of family legends,’ together with personal experience” (“Demonological Background” 605). Thus, Scott realised earlier than most the change of critical criteria that had been brought about by Romanticism. The borrowings which had once been exhibited as marks of literary competence, had come to be regarded as constituting a literary high crime, and therefore had to be concealed. Scott understood, of course, that all writers borrowed—*had* to borrow—whether they realised it or not. Being a shrewd and practical professional, he also understood that it was better to borrow as deliberately as possible. And so, he developed a method to obscure his sources, and protect himself from being accused of the heinous crime of imitation—which, according to the common Romantic theory of creation, was almost equated with plagiarism. He combined elements, ideas, scraps of narrative, from unrelated sources, which were usually obscure to begin with, and then, for extra safety, he deliberately tampered with his borrowings to make them less recognisable.

Poe followed much the same method. One thing, at least, he had in common with the student in “The Raven:” he was well read in “many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore” (Poe, *Poems* 364). Indeed, many of his borrowings are lifted from widely-different, mostly very obscure sources—but while Scott scavenged historical works for material for his novels, Poe usually

selected sources, such as Macnish's *Confessions*, that, although equally obscure, were of much later vintage. Sometimes, however, he borrowed boldly, but slyly, from some of the most popular works of his time, which were certainly not forgotten—for "Ligeia," for example, he visited Scott's own novels, or Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*. And then, instead of cautiously limiting his borrowings to a minimum, like Scott would have done, and reworking them so that they had the least possible resemblance to the original, Poe, while he also disguised his sources from an uninformed look, left in the tales a trail of "incriminating" details, which included plot devices, salient and unusual words, and sometimes even phrases, that lead the reader to his source.

Like Scott, Poe took care to give the appearance of absolute originality to his creations, at the same time, however, he also made sure that his tales could be traced to their sources, so his careful work of appropriation could be recognised. Had avoiding detection been his only concern, indeed, it would have been very easy for him to do exactly what Scott had done. That is, he could easily have introduced changes to make his many borrowings appear involuntary, or even dubious, in the unlikely event of detection, but he seems to have done something much more difficult. Most of the time, he reworked the material, adapting it to the distinctive style of his narrator and the peculiar atmosphere of mystery of "Ligeia," but only slightly, so as not to leave any doubt in a reader who found the source that the pilfering was deliberate. Indeed, I must conclude that Poe chose defiantly to exhibit his plagiarism—or what he knew most of his contemporaries would construe as such—right under the audience's nose.

Indeed, the radical change of literary ethos brought by Romanticism may be described in terms of a shifting of attitude towards imitation. Under Romanticism, the prestige that had been previously attached to *voluntary* borrowings became attached to *involuntary* borrowings, which alone were permitted. Borrowings had, at least, to appear involuntary. Thus, I think Percy Bysshe Shelley perfectly interprets the spirit of his age when he writes that "there must be a resemblance, which does not depend upon their own will, between all the writers of any particular age" (*Leon and*

*Cyntha* 136). This downplays the importance of voluntary imitation in creation, in favor of obscure associations of which the creator is supposed to be unaware—indeed, Shelley here is actually proud of his unawareness. As a writer, Poe’s narrator perfectly corresponds to this description, and this led most people to suppose Poe himself was not aware of his sources. But he left behind him enough clues to prove that, unlike his “Romantic” narrator, he was perfectly aware of his borrowings—at least, most of them—and prided himself in his art of deliberate imitation.

“*Ligeia*” is a *tour de force* in Poe’s sly new method. As an imitation, or rather a grotesque parody of Macnish’s *Confessions*, indeed, it is a feat of incredible technical virtuosity. There is enough of the original to ensure recognition, but also a difference that makes a difference, in which the writer displays his art—and his sense of humor. Indeed, Poe cleverly disguises his true intentions along with his debt to Macnish.

The title-character of “*Ligeia*,” then, physically resembles Mary Elliston in every detail. She is dark-haired, black-eyed, “tall, somewhat slender, and in her latter days, even emaciated” (Poe, “*Ligeia*” 311). Eliza’s physical description, on the other hand, matches that of the “fair-haired, blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine,” the narrator’s second dead wife—she is even shorter, and more corpulent than *Ligeia* (321). As Mary’s “phantom” approached Eliza’s corpse, as the reader will recall, William imaged the blonde corpse came back to life. In other words, the “phantom” combined with the images before him, originating a momentary illusion which is a mixture of fact and hallucination. In “*Ligeia*” we find a slightly different idea. Instead of a sudden reanimation, we have an endless cycle of apparent reanimations and what may be termed for lack of a better term mortifications, each accompanied by “I know not what of wild change in the personal appearance of the corpse,” at the end of which the narrator finally reports that “the thing that was enshrouded advanced bodily and palpably, into the middle of the room” (329). This “thing” is identified by him as *Ligeia* of the raven-black hair, his first wife. Thus, the narrator never sees Rowena come back to life—he “sees” *Ligeia* coming back to life. This is the most significant

difference between the two analogous scenes. In Poe's tale, then, the juxtaposition of the raven-haired entombed woman's "phantom" on the corpse of the blonde is so complete that they become one. Or so it appears to the narrator. This is one distinctive characteristic of Poe's tale, through which, according to Ellen Weinauer, "Poe strikingly renders the loss of individual identity incurred by women in marriage. Defined primarily by their status as married women, Ligeia and Rowena are not really different at all. The former can return in the body of the latter because, as wives, the two are fundamentally interchangeable" ("Undead Wives" 177).

But the phenomena described by the narrator is not, as is so often affirmed by critics, a case of common body-swap, or metempsychosis: the narrator gives us to understand that the body of his very blonde second wife *transformed* into the body of his entombed, long-dead, raven-haired, first wife.

In September 16, 1839, in a letter to Poe, who had previously sent him a copy of the tale, Philip Pendleton Cooke complained precisely of this. In a rather amusing display of ingenuousness, declares himself

shocked by a violation of the ghostly proprieties—so to speak—and wondered how the lady Ligeia—a wandering essence—could, in quickening the *body of the Lady Rowena* (such is the idea) become suddenly the visible, bodily, Ligeia. If Rowena's bodily form had been retained as a shell or case for the disembodied Lady Ligeia, and you [Cooke means the narrator, of course] had only become aware *gradually* that the blue Saxon eye of the 'Lady Rowena of Tremaine' grew daily darker with the peculiar, intense expression of the 'look' which had belonged to Ligeia—that a mind of grander powers, a soul of more glowing fires occupied the quickened body and gave an old familiar expression to its motions—if you had brooded and meditated upon the change until proof accumulated upon proof, making wonder certainty, and then, in the moment of some strangest of all evidence of the transition, broken cut

into the exclamation which ends the story—the effect would not have been lessened, and the ‘ghostly proprieties’ would, I think, have been better observed. (Cooke)<sup>18</sup>

But, though the narrator suggests this violation took place, he does not actually say so. Moreover, the facts he reports are not, in themselves, incompatible with common ghost lore—his interpretation of those facts, which is disingenuously suggested rather than stated, is what contradicts received ideas on ghosts. A “thing enshrouded” appeared in the middle of the room, the question is, was it a “ghost” or an actual body. Indeed, the narrator has no doubts regarding the identity of the apparition. By his own admission, the sight of the enshrouded Rowena brought him “memories of Ligeia,” and transported him in spirit to the time when he “had regarded *her* thus enshrouded,” and it is she, not Rowena, he “sees” in the end. Of this he is quite certain. After all, it is impossible to mistake his two wives. Ligeia was even *taller* than Rowena. Indeed, when he first “sees” the “thing enshrouded,” the narrator is puzzled: “*had she then grown taller since her malady?*” (Poe, “Ligeia” 326, 330). The fact that he was *thinking* about Ligeia’s “enshrouded body,” of course, suggests that his imagination had conjured her image, as it were, into existence.

Despite this, the narrator is firmly convinced that this was not a ghost—that Ligeia had been there, however briefly, in the flesh, and this, as Cooke remarks, defies the very notion of a ghost, which is traditionally defined, precisely, as a presence that impresses the sight, and perhaps the hearing or the sense of touch, but is immaterial or, at best, of very subtle materiality. In short, a ghost is usually regarded as the barely sensible manifestation of a disembodied spirit.<sup>19</sup> Underlying the belief in ghosts is the dualistic conception of human nature that informs the traditional

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18 This letter is quoted from the collection *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* in the website of the Poe Society of Baltimore, prepared by J. A. Savoye, which is the only reliable source for most extant letters written to Poe. This is an expanded edition of *The Collected Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* (2008) Savoye had previously prepared with Burton R. Pollin, which included only letters written by Poe.

19 As Walter Scott remarks in the first of his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830), the idea of ghostly apparitions is itself intrinsically paradoxical. In other words, common ghosts are themselves a violation of “ghostly proprieties,” that is, they contradict, more or less blatantly, the distinction between matter and spirit: “philosophers might plausibly argue, that, when the soul is divorced from the body, it loses all those qualities which made it, when clothed with a mortal shape, obvious to the organs of its fellow men. The abstract idea of a spirit certainly implies, that it has neither substance, form, shape, voice, or any thing which can render its presence visible or sensible to human faculties” (5).

conception of death as the moment when the spirit leaves the body. This latter conception of death is implied by the words of the narrator of "Ligeia," who recounts how he "struggled alone in my endeavors to recall the spirit still hovering" by the corpse of Rowena (Poe, "Ligeia" 327). This statement has two important implications: first, Rowena had not merely fallen into a cataleptic state, but was truly dead; second, that death is not irreversible. The narrator thus echoes the original femicide's hope that his sister's "spirit, hovering nigh, may catch the tones of remorse and affliction from [her] wretched brother" (Macnish, *Confessions* 21). Poe's narrator, however, had before thrown hints to the effect that a spirit had been "hovering" about the room for quite some time. It was there, he suggests, even before Rowena's spirit left her body. Through certain well-placed hints, he conveys the idea that this spirit belonged to Ligeia, the strong-willed first wife. Such hints create a strong expectation of metempsychosis, the possibility of which is more or less implied in the conventional pneumatology to which Cooke appeals. The adverbs "bodily" and "palpably," however, which the narrator applies to the "thing that was enshrouded" convey the impression that what happened in the room was neither metempsychosis nor a regular haunting, but another hitherto ignored phenomenon.

The narrator tells us, then, that this "thing" advanced "palpably" to the middle of the room. His peculiar turn of phrase, however, allows room to suspect this is not a fact, but his interpretation of the facts. "One bound and I had reached her [the thing's] feet!," he recounts, but: "Shrinking from my touch, she let fall from her head the ghastly cerements which had confined it, and there streamed forth into the rushing atmosphere of the chamber, huge masses of long and disheveled hair; *it was blacker than the wings of midnight!*" (Poe, "Ligeia" 330). The apparition then, "shrunk from his touch," which means, of course, that he might not have actually touched it, hence, may have only conjectured that it was "palpable."

In his reply to Cooke, dated September 21, 1829, Poe wrote that he would correct the ending to make it clear that his narrator, like William the femicide, ends up, as he began, alone with a



blonde corpse, “the bodily alterations having gradually faded away” (*Letters* 193). I suspect Poe never intended to do anything of the sort.<sup>20</sup> Mabbott remarks, the “story was revised with the greatest care,” and therefore “must be regarded as a thoroughly conscious and complete work of art” (Mabbott, *Tales* 306). I agree. If Poe suffered the ending to remain as it was, introducing only minor verbal corrections, that means he saw nothing wrong with it. It appears to me, in any case, that the proposed alteration would be redundant. Poe could not have made it any clearer that what the narrator “saw” in the middle of the room *was not* the reanimated corpse of Rowena, but the phantom of Ligeia.

The circumstances admit, therefore, of the same explanation that similar phenomena receive in *Confessions*. The bare facts are, indeed, very nearly the same. What changes is the way the solitary mourner interprets those facts. William recognised that he had been betrayed by his imagination as soon as the phantom vanished; but Poe’s narrator never realised that he was daydreaming. Indeed, there is no real reason to suppose what happens in “Ligeia” is anything but the same projection of the “phantom” of the tall, slender, dark lady on the body of the shorter, more corpulent blonde. This perfectly accounts for the apparent “personal” change to the corpse. If anything, this change makes Poe’s narrator’s illusion easier to dismiss, for the entrance of Ligeia appears to have had no effect on Rowena’s corpse: the narrator thinks he saw *her* come back to life; Rowena remained dead.

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20 G. R. Thompson expresses a similar opinion. He remarks that Poe not only did not introduce the change he mentioned to Cooke, but “took out the passage about Rowena’s seeming to struggle with an invisible foe, so that Ligeia’s final appearance was made more abrupt (...)! Given this context, the undertone of Poe’s letter to Cooke is clearly recognizable as ironic and sarcastic” (*Poe’s Fiction* 79).

Thompson’s account of Poe’s revision to this portion of the text, however, is inaccurate in two respects. Poe did cross the words “with an invisible foe,” but not the whole passage in question, in his private copy of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. This copy “(from which title page and preliminary matter have been removed) was annotated by the author in 1842 to serve as copy for a projected later edition, and contains a manuscript table of contents and [a new] title page,” which read *Phantasy Pieces* (Mabbott, *Tales* 1:1398). Many of the manuscript alterations to the text of “Ligeia” contained in this text are what Mabbott calls “abortive,” that is, they were not adopted in later editions of the tales. Poe did not adopt the change to which Thompson alludes, which, incidentally, is not as extensive as he suggests, in the two occasions in which he revised the tale for publication, first for *The New World*, and then for the *Broadway Journal*, of which he was then the editor.

Thus, the fact remains that Poe never complied with Cooke’s suggestions.

According to a small article in Coleridge's *Table Talk*, a selection of samples of the poet's private conversation culled by his nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge, the psychological mechanism involved in "vulgar ghosts" is an inversion of regular perception: "in all such cases," S. T. C. is there reported to have said, "that which is supposed to be seen is, in fact, *not* seen, but is an image of the brain. External objects naturally produce sensation; but here, in truth, sensation produces, as it were, the external object" (14). The narrator's imagination was filled, by his own admission, with images of Ligeia "thus enshrouded," therefore, his vision is perfectly consistent with the process described here. Since the narrator apparently did not touch the "bodily" Ligeia after all, we may conclude that the perfect juxtaposition of the ghost on the corpse prompted him to assimilate the two, and immediately to jump to the conclusion that the "enshrouded" Rowena had miraculously turned into the "enshrouded" Ligeia. Considering this juxtaposition, it is not at all surprising that Poe's character should experience more difficulty in separating his ghost from reality than his predecessor.

Besides, the extravagant decoration of the bridal chamber where these events took place had been specifically designed, as the narrator himself admits, to produce a "phantasmagoric effect;" to produce, that is, precisely the kind of illusion he seems to experience (Poe, "Ligeia" 322). As Terry Castle remarks, the term "phantasmagoria" had a precise "technological meaning" which "seemed to drop away altogether" throughout the nineteenth century, during the course of which, "[t]hrough a strange process of rhetoric displacement," it became a metaphor for abnormal states of consciousness, and for perception itself ("Phantasmagoria" 32):

But what does this fantastical word *phantasmagoria* really mean? We are familiar, of course, with its late romantic denotation, as in the third entry under the term in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'a shifting series or succession of phantasms or imaginary figures, as seen in a dream or fevered condition, as called up by the imagination, or as created by literary description.' But few people, I imagine, know

the word's original technical application to the so-called ghost-shows of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Europe—illusionistic exhibitions and public entertainments in which 'spectres' were produced through the use of a magic lantern. (...) it is precisely this literal meaning—and the connection with post-Enlightenment technology and popular spectacle—that has been lost. (30)

As Castle also notes, these spectacles exploited superstition under pretense of debunking it, for, though presenting themselves as “mock exercises in demystification, (...) [e]verything was done, quite shamelessly, to intensify the supernatural effect” (“Phantasmagoria” 32). Thus, the creators of “phantasmagoria” added some powerful adjuncts to the main device of projecting magic-lantern “spectres” on distorting mirrors and smokescreens, such as the “muffled sounds of wind and thunder” and the “[u]nearthly music emanated from an invisible glass harmonica,” employed by Étienne-Gaspard Robertson in his “Salle de la Fantasmagorie” (33). Yet, the most potent ingredient of the illusion was suggestion, and the clever manipulation of the very superstition that was the ostensible object of the spectacle to ridicule. Thus, in order to raise the imagination of his audience to the highest pitch of excitement before presenting his illusions, Robertson prefaced his spectacles with “a somber, incoherent, speech on death, immortality, and the unsettling power of superstition and fear to create terrifying illusions” (33). Incidentally, the same combination of unsettling auditory stimuli and morbid suggestions that played such an important role in Robertson's illusions is present in Poe's “phantasmagoric” chamber.

The “phantasmagoric” design itself, moreover, by a mechanism of optical illusion, facilitated the illusion that the dark-haired woman was taking the place of the blonde. In “Poe's Visual Tricks,” Barbara Cantalupo has already unambiguously maintained that the return of Ligeia was an optical illusion artificially created by the narrator which obscures “his purposeful role in Rowena's death,” and also that, despite his efforts, he “discloses the mechanisms that produce the ‘miraculous’ transformation of Rowena into Ligeia,” thus discrediting his presentation of himself as an innocent

bystander (55). Although I agree generically with these assertions, it appears to me that the specific “phantasmagoric” device at play in Rowena’s room is not “anamorphic,” as Cantalupo contends, but involves rather a mechanism which combines optical and mental projection and entails, therefore, an element of subjectivity. I will state my objections to this reading more fully in the second chapter of this thesis, where I will present a more detailed reading of the illusions of the narrator.

In any event, I agree with Cantalupo that, given the peculiar character of the phantasmagoria the narrator created, the dark-haired intruder cannot possibly be regarded as a *wholly* mental picture. On the contrary, if a phantasmagoria is designed precisely to produce the illusion that ghosts are about, one might say that this particular phantasmagoria was calculated to facilitate the “apparition” of the person the narrator admits was always before him “in fancy” (Poe, “Ligeia” 311). In other words, the narrator actually did see many things that reminded him of the image he had always before his eyes, as it were, and this blurred the distinction between reality and imagination. In the last paragraph of the tale, for example, he claims that the hair of the returned Ligeia streamed in the “rushing atmosphere of the chamber,” a phrasing which attracts his previous mention of that artificial “wind (...) rushing hurriedly behind the tapestries,” of which he told Rowena “the very gentle variations of the figures on the wall” were “but the natural effects” (324). This wind is one of the principal devices of his phantasmagoria.

Indeed, the shifting of the figures in the tapestry caused by this wind satisfactorily accounts for his perception that Ligeia’s hair was “rushing” in the air. The same very singular stuff could be seen everywhere in the room: the “walls (...) were hung from summit to foot, in vast folds, with a heavy and massive-looking tapestry—tapestry of a material which was found alike as a carpet on the floor, as a covering for the ottomans and the ebony bed, as a canopy for the bed, and as the gorgeous volutes of the curtains which partially shaded the window” (Poe, “Ligeia” 322). This material was “the richest cloth of gold (...) with arabesque figures about one foot in diameter, and wrought upon the cloth in patterns of the most jetty black” (323). These designs were “arabesque.”

The term refers to the intricate geometrical or stylised vegetable designs of interweaving lines employed in Muslim architecture. These black arabesque designs, then, were kept in motion by “the artificial introduction of a strong continual current of wind behind the draperies—giving a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole” (323). This, the narrator adds, “vastly heightened” the “phantasmagoric effect” (322).

This means, of course, that no matter where he looked, the narrator would see—actually see—something that very nearly resembled the “jetty” black curls of his beloved Ligeia waving in the wind. He reinforces the suggestion that he was confusing mental pictures with realities in the last paragraph of the tale, by recalling that, when the “enshrouded” Ligeia made her appearance in Rowena’s room, he felt paralysed by “a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain” (Poe, “Ligeia” 329 emphasis mine). He had previously applied the very same phrase, “rushing hurriedly,” to the wind that set the arabesques in the tapestry in motion. This chain of verbal echoes culminates in the very last sentence of the tale, with Ligeia’s “disheveled hair” flowing about in the “rushing atmosphere of the room” (329). Thus, Ligeia’s hair and the narrator’s brain, on the one side, the artificial wind and the black arabesques, on the other, are associated in a way that confirms, in practice, he was confusing the two.

But the illusion, in itself, as I have said earlier, is not the decisive element in a “phantasmagoria.” The art of the creators of “phantasmagoria” consisted in making their spectators forget, if only momentarily, what they had known all along—that the spectres were only illusions. The spectator was not hallucinating, that is, imagining things; rather, he was tricked into misinterpreting what he actually saw. Likewise, all would be well if the narrator of “Ligeia” could believe that he was experiencing an illusion—but he could not. Excited by the combined influence of opium, remorse, and superstition, the narrator easily convinced himself that the arabesques *were* Ligeia’s curls.

And the decoration of the chamber, being dominated by the black arabesques on the golden background of the tapestry, itself suggests the superimposition of the dark hair of Ligeia on the blonde Rowena. The narrator of the tale was evidently not immune to this suggestion. In this sense, and given the subjective perspective adopted by Poe, the animated tapestry is not merely a symbolic foreshadowing of the climax of the tale; it is its probable proximate cause.

The purpose of the stage illusion known as phantasmagoria was precisely that of promoting the confusion between mental pictures and external reality. By reminding us of the technological devices involved in such spectacles, and forcing us to consider the factors that went into the creation of a “phantasmagoric” effect, Poe shows us that his narrator was fooled by an illusion he created by means he does not fully understand. Superstitious in despite of himself, and obsessed with the image of his late first wife, Poe’s narrator is in fact in that peculiarly susceptible state of mind Robertson attempted to induce in his public by the morbid speeches by which he prepared the entrance of his spectral and auditory illusions.

Therefore, I cannot agree with Castle’s assessment of the phantasmagoria in “Ligeia.” According to that critic, the “mental picture” that haunted the narrator “appears to come to life, fantastically, *in the flesh*. The phantom becomes a reality. Granted, hints of illusionism remain. (...) But,” he concludes, “even as we recognize these signs of artifice, we also succumb—along with the narrator (...)—to the incontrovertible reality of what is *seen*. It is (...) the real Lady Ligeia who rises from the bier” (“Phantasmagoria” 41). We, the readers, do indeed succumb, like the spectators of a real-life phantasmagoria, to suggestion—but the question is whether we must, as is here implied, unavoidably do so. It appears to me that Castle confuses the phantasmagoric effect of the tale itself with its true import, without fully grasping the implications of the extreme subjective focalisation adopted by Poe. The narrator does not understand the illusion he created, and therefore succumbs; but the reader is not doomed to be trapped in the phantasmagoria, for he is provided not with mere “hints of illusionism,” but with a complex mixture of obsessions and technologically induced

illusions to which all his phantasms may, and indeed must be reduced. Castle himself comes very close to what I believe is the key to the tale: “The entire Rowena/Ligeia transformation is very much like the phantasmagorical effect known as transmutation, achieved by shifting two magic-lantern slides together” (41). In reality, the transformation is not merely analogous to the optical process of superimposition; it is, in fact, the result of an actual, albeit bizarre, process of superimposition. Indeed, contrary to Castle’s suggestion, the “incontrovertible reality of what is seen”—what the narrator unquestionably saw—corrodes the credibility of his claim that Ligeia returned in the flesh.

Although he admits Poe was “well aware, of course, of the technical meaning of *phantasmagoria*,” which was already in the process of being forgotten, Castle maintains that the phantasmagoria in “Ligeia” is actually a metaphor. “The familiar metaphor enforces a pervasive sense of the *illusory*: just as we take artificially produced effects of light and shadow for apparitions, or see figures in moving draperies, Poe implies, so we mistake the images in our heads for realities” (“Phantasmagoria” 40, 41). Yet, the “phantasmagoria” in “Ligeia” is *not* a metaphor. In its literal, technical sense the term “phantasmagoria” denoted a stage illusion based on the projection of images by means of a magical lantern; later, this spectacle became a metaphor of haunting, or more precisely, the magic-lantern became a metaphor for the mind of the haunted individual, who, according to the common associationist explanation of the phenomenon embodied by Coleridge in the passage transcribed above, projected—as it were—a mental picture on external reality. In “Ligeia,” Poe quite deliberately deploys both meanings, the literal and the figurative, at the same time, letting the former clash with the latter. As a result, the metaphorical sense becomes inviable, for one simply cannot reasonably attribute an apparition to supernatural agency that may be explained as a phantasmagoric effect.

This effect, being the most conspicuous sign of the narrator’s complete unreliability, inasmuch as it blurs the details of the story into a “mystical” vagueness, is also his most effective

disguise. Thus, it performs the double function of obscuring the narrator's true character along with his crime, and Poe's borrowings from Macnish. Indeed, Poe's greatest debt to Macnish is the kind of unreliable narrator he used in his tales, and the "tone of truth" that guaranteed the success of his hoax. The narrator of "Ligeia" is not only unreliable in the same way, he is also a femicide. This basic resemblance is then confirmed by many small details, but these details are themselves masked by the overall atmosphere of mystery. Thus the connection between the two tales is itself indistinct, and not readily apparent. Just like his narrator confuses past and present, so the reader who reads his and Macnish's tale inevitably ends up jumbling the two together, without being able, at first, to clearly define the affinity between the narrators. This is one of the characteristic effects of Poe's art.

Specifically, many circumstances that are adequately explained in *Confessions* are presented without any explanation in Poe's tale. For example, like William, Poe's narrator knew his adventures with the cadaver of the blonde woman would have no witnesses, for Rowena's room was located in a "turret (...) altogether apart from the portion of the abbey tenanted by the servants," and from which there was no way to call them "without leaving the room for many minutes" (Poe, "Ligeia" 327). But, while in *Confessions* William openly acknowledges he dismissed the servants, the narrator of "Ligeia" merely states the fact, as if this was a fortuitous circumstance, thus misleading the reader. Indeed, he had prepared his new bride's quarters before his marriage. With this sentence, therefore, he indirectly admits he had imprisoned his wife in the remotest part of the building as soon as they got home, but provides no explanation for it. The decision, of course, speaks for itself.

This pattern is repeat throughout the tale. Poe systematically withdraws the explanations from his imitation. Here is another example. William was gazing on the exquisite "form" stretched before him, and "remembered what she had been to me." This sight, therefore, induced a sort of reverie, which so totally absorbed him that he "remarked (...) not" the arrival of the "fatal hour" of ten. Every night at that hour, the hour of the crime, Mary appeared to remind her murderer of his



guilt. There is nothing especially mysterious about this, for the reader knows why William is haunted by the ghost of Mary Elliston. In “Ligeia,” a very similar ghost—for all indicates it is a ghost—occurs under very similar circumstances, but, as usual, things are made considerably more mystical. There too the watcher had his eyes fixed on “the pallid and rigid figure upon the bed” when he started reminiscing, only in his case, he thought about his first wife, the long-dead, dark Ligeia (Poe, “Ligeia” 326). He abandoned himself, during the whole grotesque spectacle, to “passionate waking visions of” her, just like William, who had a distinct predilection for full-blooded blondes, pictured her sister in her living days (327). Both were engrossed by their favorite subject, but they had different tastes in women. And then, like his predecessor, the narrator of “Ligeia” “had taken no note of time” when he was startled from his reverie by what he believed was a sigh. When the “fatal hour” arrived, therefore, one “remarked it not,” while the other was taking “no note” of time: two ways of saying the same thing (326)<sup>21</sup>. Ligeia made her appearance in Rowena’s wake at midnight, whereas Mary appeared at ten, but this does not make a whole lot of difference, aside from the fact of midnight being conventionally termed the witching hour. What is significant, is that the narrator is unsure: “It might have been midnight, or earlier, or later” (326). He assumed it was midnight—but why? One suspects his ghost was as punctual as William’s.

And here is another coincidence. William’s flattering illusion of reanimation is punctured when he touches the “icy” corpse. Likewise, the corpse of Rowena looks lively to Poe’s narrator when he regards it from afar, with his head full of thoughts of Ligeia, but every time he gets up and touches it, he is disappointed. In this case, the comparison between the two tales is irresistibly funny—although the joke is perhaps a little crude. In both, the narrator is the only living actor in a ghostly drama performed for the reader. But, whereas William realises he was imagining things the first time he touches the corpse, Poe’s narrator is caught in a loop, going back and forward between his seat and the bed where the corpse lay, without grasping the obvious: that what he was “seeing” the

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21 The narrator of *Ligeia* started seeing things at about midnight, but that does not make a whole lot of difference. Besides, he is, as usual, unsure: “It might have been midnight, or earlier, or later” (Poe, “*Ligeia*” 326).

ghost of the dark lady. Each time he finds his corpse as cold and stiff as William had found his, but imagines the body is cycling between life and death, when it would have been much more reasonable for him to conclude that he was labouring under an illusion. Ultimately, both narrators are left alone with a corpse, but while William openly acknowledges that the “phantom” “had fled, and left no token of her presence behind;” this too is only implied in Poe’s tale (*Macnish, Confessions* 22).

The similarities between the two scenes extend to the reactions of the narrators to the apparent reanimation of the woman whose wake they are performing. William found himself “bound to his seat;” Poe’s character suffers a similar paralysis: “I felt my heart cease to beat, my limbs grow rigid where I sat” (Poe, “Ligeia” 327). The paralysis in Poe’s tale is more explicitly death-like—the narrator fancies himself literally mortified—; the insistence on “rigidity” is also more suggestive of sexual arousal. This and the narrator’s obvious obsession with death have led Amper, who was not acquainted with *Confessions*, to remark that the ending of the tale “acts out,” as she puts it, “a necrophilic orgy” (“Masters of Deceit” 140).

This suggestion, however, which Poe conveys, as is characteristic of him, mystically, is much more obvious in the corresponding passages of Macnish’s tale. In William’s reverie, the corpse of his sister is revived by the kisses of her female friend Mary and the two then engage in an exchange of “embraces.” The narrator speaks of Mary’s fondness for his sister as an “unspeakable affection,” and I believe Macnish thus signaled to his reader that the femicide’s disturbed fancy presented to him a homosexual encounter between the two friends, which was itself an expression of his own “unspeakable affection” for his sister, which had been transferred to her friend Mary. Thus, Mary, who had provided a viable outlet for his forbidden desire for his sister, now becomes a weird sexual mediator between the two. Indeed, the lone watcher found the vision of the two friends exchanging caresses so overpoweringly pleasing that he could “stand it no longer,” and, recovering from his temporary death-like paralysis, joined them. Here the implied sexual tension reaches its

peak, and the reader cannot be blamed if he wonders just exactly what the narrator meant when, a few lines before, he had declared “I never loved her till now” (Macnish, *Confessions* 20). A similar impression results from “Ligeia,” though, as usual, the train of associations that leads to it is much more convoluted. As we have seen, the preferences of the narrators are inverted in the two tales. Poe’s narrator was sexually attracted primarily to the dead Ligeia. Of her, the narrator tells us: “in death only was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection” (Poe, “Ligeia” 317). When he saw the enshrouded Rowena, he was reminded of Ligeia “thus enshrouded.” Apparently, the shroud triggered recollections of a previous necrophiliac encounter with *her*, and, through association, his desired was again aroused.

The wake scene in Macnish’s *Confessions*, with its suggestions of necrophilia, is itself an obvious nod to the most memorable scene in Matthew Lewis’ delightfully outrageous shocker, *The Monk*. In book III, chapter IV the infamous title-character, Ambrosio the monk, eagerly awaits the reanimation of the ravishing Antonia in the crypt of the female monastery next door to his (the two convents being, of course, in typical Gothic fashion, conveniently connected by an underground passage), after having slipped her a special potion that he had been assured would plunge her in a state of inanimation almost exactly resembling death. Ambrosio had made repeated sexual advances to Antonia, whose virtue proved unassailable, and at length adopted the scheme that had been suggested to him by his companion and former lover, the super-learned witch Matilda. The object of that scheme was, precisely, to guarantee the monk some time alone with the “corpse,” far from prying eyes and ears. He had “no cause to dread an interruption,” and felt certain that “totally in his power, Antonia would comply with his desire” (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 377).<sup>22</sup> His situation, therefore, almost exactly matches that depicted in the climactic scene of *Confessions*. This resemblance is increased by the fact that Antonia and Ambrosio were brother and sister—although neither of them knew this at the time. Yet, the expectations of Ambrosio are not frustrated as

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22 I have used Howard Anderson’s edition of the novel, which follows the manuscript on which the first edition was based.

William's: his seductive sister does come back to life, as predicted, that he may satisfy his unlawful desire. He realises his fantasies, therefore, under cover of death, but with a live woman—although he ends up killing her once the deed is done. In *Confessions*, of course, “love” comes significantly *after* the death of the sister.

Like William, by the time he watches the life-dead object of his sexual fantasies the monk had already committed femicide and was haunted by the recollection of that crime. Ambrosio had killed Elvira, Antonia's and, as he would later find out, his mother and now, even as he indulged his lust for his sister, the sight of the “rotting bones and disgusting figures” of the bona fide corpses of nuns in the tomb, the thought of his victim, “by him reduced to the same state,” intruded on his fantasies (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 379). The monk is actually guilty of all those unspeakable crimes that the male tyrants in the novels of Anne Radcliffe's school of Gothic, who are never as evil as they seem, had not been permitted to commit: femicide, rape, incest, and even matricide.

Contemporary audiences were simultaneously fascinated and appalled by the open depiction of sexuality and horror which previous Gothic novels had promised but never delivered. As Emma McEvoy remarks: “It is not that the 1790s was a homogeneously conservative decade, but rather that the frightened conservatives of the time reacted strongly to the book,” and raised the tone of the controversy with “hysterical reactions” (Introduction x). Lewis was charged with corrupting public morals, an accusation that was all the more serious as the novel was then seen as a genre aimed at women and young men, and therefore required to conform to strict notions of decorum and didacticism. On the one hand, most readers felt Lewis's titillating descriptions of the female body, and representation of the joys of sex, made vice, as sexual pleasure was perceived by the puritanical establishment, alluring to a public from which these critics thought these things should be zealously concealed. It was also thought that this supposedly ingenuous and unprepared public required simple and unambiguous inducements to chastity. On the one hand, the monk's evil schemes to satisfy his lust were crowned with success, which was bad enough in itself. And then, most

shocking of all, the virtue of Antonia and Elvira in general, and the modesty of the former in particular, were not ultimately rewarded, as was also customary in the novels of Radcliffe, but rather punished, as it were, by death at the hands of the profligate monk. Thus, it was feared that the book might prove an irresistible encouragement to vice for a susceptible audience, which was not likely to be frightened by the monk's being at length snatched by a devil which represented the Gothic superstition which had been ridiculed throughout the novel, and carried to a Hell of fire and brimstone the belief in which had long since fallen out of fashion.

Also levelled at Lewis's novel was the more serious accusation of blasphemy. Indeed, the novel contained some iconoclastic passages that proved even more shocking to contemporary audiences than the openly erotic passages. The narrator's equiparation of "[m]any of the narratives" contained in the Good Book with pornography was particularly criticised: "Every thing is called plainly and roundly by its name; and the annals of a Brothel would scarcely furnish a greater choice of indecent expressions. (...) this is the Book (...) which but too frequently inculcates the first rudiments of vice, and gives the first alarm to the still sleeping passions" (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 259). Not only did Lewis call things by their name, he dared to suggest that his book was no more immoral than the Bible.

Indeed, in *The Publication of 'The Monk:' A Literary Event, 1796-1798* (1960), which remains the most comprehensive study of the scandal surrounding the novel, André Parreaux shows that immorality and blasphemy were the two accusations commonly hurled at it by its first reviewers. As regards the first, he writes, "*The Monthly Review* asserted simply that 'a vein of obscenity' pervaded the whole novel and made it 'totally unfit for general circulation. Coleridge," however, in a review published in *Critical Review* for February 1797 "did not content himself with such vague generalities: he was much more specific in his criticism. He blamed the 'libidinous minuteness' with which the temptations of Ambrosio were described; 'the shameless harlotry of

Matilda and the trembling innocence of Antonia’ were made ‘the vehicles of the most voluptuous images’” (89-90).

However, Parreaux also notes that: “It was only after the identity of the author was revealed that the book began to be branded as immoral” (*Publication* 87). Indeed, the first edition did not identify the author, and Lewis only owned his creation in the second edition, published in the Summer of 1796. Some critics, notably Coleridge, were particularly incensed by the fact that Lewis had identified himself as a Member of Parliament. In the wake of this scandal, which would plague him for the rest of his days, Lewis was tried for immorality. According to Emma McEvoy:

Although contemporary accounts do not make clear how far the proceedings went, it is known that Lewis was taken to court, with the result that he had to pledge and recall existing copies of the third edition and alter and delete certain passages for the fourth. In the censored edition there are no mentions of sexual activity, no ‘on-stage’ seductions or murder attempts, and gone are the descriptions of unclothed female bodies. All the musings on physical pleasure and the physical differences between the sexes have disappeared, and the climatic crypt scene is omitted as are all mentions of such provocative words as ‘lust,’ ‘incontinence,’ and ‘enjoyment.’ (Introduction ix)

Parreaux concurs that the most sexually suggestive scenes had been cancelled along with the more provocative words, including “the long scene in the vaults of the convent, where Antonia is at last violated” (*Publication* 121). However, such accounts of Lewis’s revisions are not entirely accurate. Louis F. Peck, in his *A Life of Matthew Lewis* (1961), which remains the most reliable biography of the author, remarked that “Lewis’ alterations of his romance are superficial and do not affect the narrative or the central idea of the story” (35). In fact, Lewis left some very conspicuous references to sexual activity, notably in the crypt scene, which was severely abridged, but not altogether omitted. Such references, however, were significantly toned down for the revised edition. In the original, the monk horrified his reader when he

lifted her [Antonia] still motionless from the Tomb: He seated himself upon a bank of Stone, and supporting her in his arms, watched impatiently for the symptoms of returning animation. Scarcely could He command his passions sufficiently, to restrain himself from enjoying her while yet insensible. His natural lust was increased in ardour by the difficulties, which had opposed his satisfying it: As also from his long abstinence from Woman. (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 379)

Like William the femicide, Ambrosio found the seemingly dead woman irresistibly attractive. In fact, he was evidently about to assault her even at a point when it was still unclear whether she would actually come back to life. Since the monk was as attracted to the “person” of Antonia as before, the reader is not permitted to doubt he would have satisfied his lust anyway. In those days, of course, necrophilia could not openly be depicted in print. Yet, Lewis shamefacedly challenges this taboo, forcing his reader to acknowledge the possibility of an unutterable act the realisation of which he denies in the last moment, thus complying, at least nominally, with the moral code. In this sense, he mimics the subterfuge that had been employed so many times by Ann Radcliffe in her novels to suggest the possibility of unspeakable sexual acts and femicide.

In the first three editions, Antonia gradually came to, at which point the monk attempted to talk her into having sex with him, and, failing to do so, finally resorted to brute force. His victim is, however, piously spared from witnessing her own rape: she “fainted ere the completion of her disgrace: She only recovered life to be sensible of her misfortune” (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 384). The several paragraphs describing these events were expurgated from the fourth edition, and replaced by a single elliptical paragraph culminating in the following sentence: “Animation was only restored to make her [Antonia] sensible that the monk was a villain, and herself undone!” (M. Lewis, *Ambrosio* 196). Thus, while Lewis expunged all the graphic details from the scene to spare the sensibility of his readership, thus apparently complying with the demands of his censors, he made the rape of Antonia resemble even more an act of necrophilia than before, by enacting the shocking possibility

which he had narrowly avoided the first time and which, surprisingly, his detractors seem to have found acceptable. Indeed, the monk now explicitly rapes Antonia before she ever regained her senses. Thus, I cannot quite agree with Peck when he writes that “Lewis fully complied” with the demands of his more indignant critics by preparing a version of the novel that “contains nothing which could endanger the most fragile virtue” (*A Life* 34). On the contrary, it appears to me that Lewis deftly circumvented those demands.

Public outrage surrounding the first editions of *The Monk*, as well as the more favorable reception of the revised novel, signalled to other writers that the graphic depiction of sexual acts would not be tolerated, but also that the implied representation of such acts, even in such horrific circumstances, was acceptable. Indeed, just as the monk had to take his unlawful lust to the crypt—for this had been a means of concealing his criminal sexuality—, so, after the strong public reaction to the graphic narrative of his exploits, Lewis’s imitators had to encrypt the sexual content in their imitations of his novel to elude censorship, and this is exactly what Macnish accomplished in *The Confessions*, where sexuality is constantly implied, but never actually stated. Poe will then encrypt the scene still further, while making his and Macnish’s debt to “Monk” Lewis much more obvious by adding five “sarcophagi” to the room—presumably containing decaying corpses like those in the monk’s crypt—and by having his narrator suggest that Rowena was prematurely buried after some “ghostly” drops had fallen into her wine,<sup>23</sup> which he “mystically” hints were placed there by none other than the ghost of the dark lady “Ligeia,” whom the narrator suggests was, like Matilda, an adept of the dark arts.<sup>24</sup>

All this demonstrates, I think, the point I have made at the beginning of this section. There is nothing original about any of this. Yet, by skillfully weaving together all these sources, Poe created

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23 When he “saw” Rowena start to stir, the narrator thought: “I could no longer doubt that we had been precipitate in our preparations—that Rowena still lived” (Poe, “Ligeia” 327). Later, of course, he revised his assessment, deciding that it was Ligeia that still lived.

24 The revelation of Matilda’s dealings with the devil is, in itself, one of those typical Gothic twists by which Lewis redeems his transgressions against conventional morality. In this connection, it should be noticed that the drops she gave Ambrosio are not a supernatural elixir, but a soporific.



something that was radically new. But of course, the materials from which this grotesque extravaganza was created—or, more precisely, composed—did not come from the high-brow Romantic literature by which Poe is generally supposed to have been inspired, but rather from the middle-brow prose fiction that has, for the most part, been ignored by modern scholars. Some of the tale's most "mystical" sentences are, I think, clues to the "composite" nature of the tale. For example, Poe has his narrator say that he got, "not unfrequently from passages from books" the same mysterious feeling that Ligeia's eyes used to inspire in him (Poe, "Ligeia" 314). He, the narrator, however, does not say which passages, and speaks only of vague, obscurely felt connections. It is another matter with the author—he evidently knew exactly where he had found his narrator's feelings.

### 3 - The Mysterious Note

Besides the tale itself, Poe left us another clue, in the form of a bewildering unsigned note on "Ligeia" published in the February 15, 1845 issue of the *New World*, which also included the third ever publication of the tale. The note divulges information about the tale and its composition that could only have come from the author himself, and which was not then publicly available. This, along with its mischievous tone, convinces me that it was planted by Poe as another of those elaborate hoaxes he so often employed to quiz the public. The editor starts by extolling the "boldness of the conception and the high artistic skill, with which the writer's purpose is wrought out," and then adds:

Mark the exquisite art, which keeps constantly before the reader the ruined and spectre-haunted mind of the narrator, and so suggests a *possible explanation* for the marvels of the story, without in the least weakening its vigor as an exposition of the mystical *thesis* which the tale is designed to illustrate and enforce.

The story will be, we presume, entirely new to most of our readers. It appeared we believe originally in England, in a volume of which only a small edition was printed. The volume is now out of print. We suggest that some of our enterprising publishers would do well in giving it to the public without delay. In our copy of *LIGEIA*, the author has put the last hand to his work, and improved it by several important changes and additions. In its present form it has not seen the light before. We shall have the pleasure of laying before our readers hereafter other similar contributions from the same source. (Mabbott, *Tales* 333n22)<sup>25</sup>

Mabbott scrupulously relayed the note, but, taking it at face value, saw in it nothing more than shameless self-puffery. “No authoritative record of the English printing mentioned has been found,” is his terse remark (Mabbott, *Tales* 333n22). However, “mention” is too strong a word. The note does suggest such a publication, but you could never pin the writer down to the statement in Mabbott’s paraphrase—the note-writer ensured plausible deniability. What he actually says is that the “story” would not be “entirely new” for those acquainted with a certain volume that *had never been published in America*. Readers were likely to imagine that the note *did* refer to an English volume of his tales, and this was just as well, from the professional writer’s point of view. The mother country was still very much the standard of taste in the quondam colony, and therefore, an English publication still commanded respect in America.

Closer inspection shows that the note is actually absurd if we suppose it to refer to the mythical English publication of “Ligeia.” Why would the writer urge the American republication of a volume containing an earlier form of a tale an “improved” version of which was being published? The nonsense itself should have tipped Mabbott off. It is there to signal that the note is not what it seems; that it is a poser. Indeed, this is the sort of bibliographical riddle that Poe had long been in the habit of palming on the public. Its apparent import is that “Ligeia” had been “originally”

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<sup>25</sup> I quote the note from Mabbott’s transcription, included in one of his notes to “Ligeia.” A photographic reproduction of the original note, which appeared in page 105 of *The New World*, may be found in ProQuest’s American Periodicals Series.

published in England—indeed, it implies not only that the tale had been published there, but that this had been the *first* time it had been printed. This is what may be termed the spirit of the text. But this implies several surmises on the reader's part which directly contradict its letter. But then, it is almost impossible to paraphrase the note without making many such surmises, such is its vagueness.

However vague it may be in other respects, the note positively ascertains, for example, that the “story” which appeared in that number of *The New World* was not “original.” And, since it was not original, the presumption that it would be, nevertheless, “entirely new” to the majority of the readers of the *New World* leads to the conclusion that the original “form” of the tale had not been made generally available to the American magazine-reading public and, conversely, that it would be only *partially* new to those who had seen that “volume” of which only a “small edition” had been “printed,” and which was “now,” at the time of writing, “out of print.”

Mabbott assumes “story” is a synonym of “tale.” This is another surmise the text does not allow. Indeed, the distinction between the two is implied in the first sentence I transcribed. The term “story” unequivocally refers to the sequence of events, namely the “marvels” depicted, while “tale” relates to the point of view of the narration, hence, to the particular mode of representation. “Story” here roughly corresponds, therefore, to Aristotle’s *μῦθος*. Indeed, the note writer—at this point, I think we might as well call him Poe—begins by drawing attention to the fact that the same “story,” or sequence of events, may be told in any number of ways. This particular tale, “Ligeia,” is itself characterised by the contest between two conflicting interpretations of the “story.” On the one hand, we have the “*possible explanation*” that is “suggested,” hence not stated; on the other, the “thesis” which the tale is ostensibly “designed to illustrate and enforce.” This “thesis,” of course, corresponds to the narrator’s own interpretation of the “marvels,” which is said to prevail over the alternative explanation. However, the note actually slyly contradicts the narrator, thereby suggesting that he succeeded only in drawing the readers to a false conclusion. Indeed, it flatly states that the

alternative explanation, that the narrator is delirious, is *possible*—if this is the case, there is of course no reason to accept the narrator’s *impossible* hypothesis. In fact, the reasoning which supports his thesis is predicated on the assumption that the “marvels” of the “story” cannot be explained. In effect, the note implies that the tale is a hoax, as I have attempted to demonstrate in the previous section. Since no one had ever so much as suspected it of being a hoax, this provides very strong evidence that Poe was the author of the note. What I would like to emphasise here, however, is that the note stakes no claim to originality of “story,” extolling instead the “exquisite art” of the *telling*.

This fundamental distinction reveals the solution to the riddle. Poe is not boasting of an English publication of his tale. He had explicitly rejected “absolute originality” as a standard of artistic merit in his criticism—indeed, he disputed its possibility—, and now draws attention instead to his own cleverness in stealing a “story” he admits he knew the American public would not recognise. Open confession of imitation, as Scott had earlier realised, would be tantamount to literary suicide. Poe, therefore, did not openly confess his imitation, but left a trail of literary crumbs by which the reader might appreciate the “exquisite art” of what he regarded as his highest literary achievement. This art consisted in making striking new combinations of motives, ideas, and even whole “stories,” that were already in circulation and making the product of this combination appear spontaneous.

This interpretation, however, would have remained only a conjecture if a “volume” that responded to Poe’s challenge could not be located. *The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide* is a perfect match. First, and most importantly, the “story,” particularly the “marvels” in the wake scene, namely the apparent reanimation of the blonde corpse upon the apparition of the entombed dark lady, are close enough to “Ligeia” to justify the note’s claim that they were not entirely new. Of course, in *Confessions* the “possible explanation” mentioned in the note is not obscured by a supernatural “thesis,” which also corroborates the suggestion that “Ligeia” presents an old story in a

new way. And then, from a bibliographical perspective, the original pamphlet edition also perfectly corresponds to the description. The “story” had been originally published, as the note specified, in a “volume,” that is, in book form. This is distinctive in itself, for most short fiction in those days, including Poe’s and Macnish’s, was first published in the periodical press. Even the doubt expressed by the note regarding the place of publication (“we believe in England”) is a clue. *Confessions* was first published sometime before August 11, 1827 in Glasgow, *Scotland*, which, strictly speaking, is not *England*.<sup>26</sup> The original pamphlet, moreover, had by 1845 indeed been long “out of print,” as the note implies.

The note further implies, as we have seen, that the original story had not been published in America. This too was not *entirely* true. Although Macnish’s hoax was far from unknown to the American public, the peculiar circumstances of its publication in the United states made it very unlikely that his readers would detect the source of Poe’s “story,” and especially his borrowings from the wake scene. As far as I could ascertain, the first American periodical to print the story was *The New-York Mirror, and Ladies’ Literary Gazette*, in October 6, 1827. Then followed the *Phenix Gazette* of Alexandria, Virginia, *The American Watchman & Delaware Advertiser*, the *North American, or, Weekly Journal of Politics, Science and Literature* of Baltimore, the *Midgeville Southern Recorder* of Milledgeville, Georgia, *The Casket, or, Flowers of Literature, Wit, and Sentiment* of Philadelphia, the *Indiana Palladium* of Lawrenceburg, Indiana, and finally the *Ariel*, also of Philadelphia, which featured the tale in its November 17 edition. For some reason, more than a year later, on February 13, the *Hagerstown Mail*, of the town of that name in Maryland, gave a new lease of life to the story. Evidently, *Confessions* was very widely available in America, which apparently disqualifies it to be the solution of Poe’s riddle—but only apparently.

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26 The earliest public reference to the publication of the pamphlet I could locate is in an article in the August 11 edition of the short-lived Glaswegian magazine *The Ant*, the relevant portion of which is transcribed below. This states that the tale had appeared in Glasgow the previous Saturday, that is, August 4, 1827. A chronology of the publication of *The Confessions* may be found in the Appendix.

With the sole exception of the small Lawrenceburg *Palladium*, these papers printed only the first half of the tale. The events that follow the killing, from the first apparition of the ghost of the murdered dark-haired woman to the wake scene and the apparent reanimation of the blond Eliza, and beyond, were excluded from this edited form of the tale. Since this was precisely the part of the tale that had a more noticeable resemblance with “Ligeia,” Poe’s source was virtually unrecognisable in the form in which it had been made available to most American readers. More importantly, this was the form published by the magazines, *New-York Mirror*, *The Ariel*, and *The Casket*. These were relatively expensive publications, which, unlike the disposable newspapers, were meant to be bound in a volume. Therefore, the incomplete version of the tale could still be easily procured. But very few copies of the November 4, 1827 issue of the *Palladium*, containing the second part of the tale, would still be around more than ten years after publication. This, then, justifies the mysterious note’s appeal to “enterprising publishers,” urging them to giving the original of Poe’s “story” to the American public.

The explanation for the systematic omission of the second part of the tale, with the entire wake scene and its shocking thinly veiled hints of incestuous necrophilia, is traceable to the history of the publication of *Confessions* in the English newspapers, from which the American periodicals picked it up. In the days and weeks that followed its original publication in Glasgow, circa August 4, 1827, two different versions of the narrative appeared in the British press: one complete in one delivery, the other divided in two installments, the first of which invariably ended abruptly on the same spot, with the murder of the pregnant Mary Elliston. The *Liverpool Mercury*, in its August 24 edition, was unquestionably the first to adopt the first procedure, as may be gleaned from the fact that the editorial note that accompanies this edition of the tale being partially transcribed as an epigraph for the fourth Macphun edition, where it is identified as part of a “A Review in the *Liverpool Mercury*” (Macnish, *Confessions* 1). The two-part version was apparently much more widely available. The earliest printing of the first installment I could locate appears in the first page

of the August 23 edition of *The Standard*, where it is preceded by a different editorial note, which begins with the words “A deeply affecting narrative.” The American papers and magazines I mentioned earlier all published this two-part version of the tale, always accompanied by the respective note, but most of them claim to have lifted it from an earlier publication, the “Liverpool Albion” of August 20, 1827, a copy of which I have not been able to locate. Most of the note that accompanied the first part of the tale is also included in the fourth pamphlet edition of *Confessions* as a second epigraph, but is there attributed to a different source, *The St. James Chronicle*, which I also have not seen.

In *The Standard*, the earliest printing of the two-part version I could locate, the editorial statement ended with the announcement that the conclusion of the story would be published in the following edition of the paper. “We insert, to-day, an extract from the first part of the *Confessions*, and, in our next paper, we purpose making an extract from the sequel of the story.” (Editorial *The Standard* emphasis mine). For undisclosed reasons *The Standard* never fulfilled its promise, and neither did most of the other English papers who carried the first part of the tale with the same note. Perhaps the editors deemed the second part too scandalous. In any case, the *Standard*’s failure to publish the announced conclusion suggests that it copied the story from some other paper, perhaps the *Chronicle* mentioned by Macphun, along with the editorial note, and then, upon seeing the second installment, decided not to publish it.

For some reason, all the American periodicals mentioned above published the first installment of the tale, as it appears in *The Standard*, and always preceded by the same prefatory note, with the exception of the last words, underlined in my transcription. Thus, none of them signaled the intention of featuring a sequel to the “extract” being published and, as far as I could ascertain, did not publish it, with the single exception of the *Indiana Palladium*, which, oddly enough, also did not announce the conclusion, but went on to print it anyway in its November 24 issue, reiterating that it had been taken “From the Liverpool Albion.” Thus, despite its being

divulged widely in America, the American reading public, with exception of those few readers who may have had access to the original British publications, had only seen a truncated version of *The Confessions*, in which the wake scene was omitted—and this more than a decade before Poe published the first version of “Ligeia,” and almost two before the mysterious note appeared in *The New World*.

Poe, on the other hand, evidently had not forgotten the narrative, which had almost certainly attracted his attention at the time. By 1827 Poe was starting out as a writer, and would have been then, as he was for the remainder of his career, very attentive to the literary magazines. And he had reasons to be especially attentive to *The North American* of Baltimore, which some months prior to the publication of the first part of *The Confessions* had been one of the first publications to feature one of the poems from Poe’s first book of verse, the ill-fated *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827).<sup>2728</sup> Perhaps he encountered Macnish’s tale for the first time there. By September 1838, at least, when “Ligeia” was first published, he had evidently obtained a complete copy of *Confessions*.

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27 “The Happiest Day” appeared in the *North American* for September 15, 1827, where it was signed with the initials of Poe’s brother, “W.H.P.” The poem had originally appeared in *Tamerlane and Other Poems, By a Bostonian*, which was, according to Mabbott, “on sale about July” 1827 (*Poems* 21).

28 The “extract” from *Confessions* also appeared in a magazine with which Poe’s career is intimately connected, *The Casket*, which would be merged with *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* to form *Graham’s Magazine*, which was edited by Poe from April 1841 to May 1842.

Poe’s interest in the *Casket*, of course, predated his professional engagement with *Graham’s*. He must have known, at least, when *The Casket* published one of his poems, the “Sonnet -To Science,” in October 1830, fairly early in his career.

Earlier that same year, an enigmatic anonymous poem entitled “The Femicide” had appeared in the magazine which was calculated to interest a writer like Poe. It was preceded by the following note: “The picture I have endeavored to draw in the following stanzas is from life. The incidents are literally true. Though the general reader may discover in the ‘Femicide’ some analogy, in circumstance, to that humbling picture of human depravity, ‘The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide,’ an extract from which may be found in the 11th No. of the *Casket* for 1827, yet it is not the same, nor are they like, save in the catastrophe of female error” (141).

Had he missed it the first time, I am perfectly convinced that this note could not have failed to excite Poe’s curiosity for the tale mentioned in the note, and to which the poem’s very title alludes. The note is, in any case, an important document for the history of the femicide story. It documents that Macnish’s hoax was at least a minor sensation in the United States too. More than two years after it first came to America, it was still remembered, and what is more, the very word “femicide” was still being associated with it.

And then, there is also the distinctively provoking tone of the note, concentrated in the last line, the irony of which only those who had read *Confessions* were equipped to appreciate. The title may be presumed to refer to the killer, not the killing. One gets the impression that the poem represents the feelings and the point of view of that unsavory character. Though the note asserts this is a different “femicide,” mention of “female error,” suggests that *this* femicide is not all that different from the original. All this seems to me a very good indication that at least some people in America had got Macnish’s hoax before Poe started publishing his variations on the theme.



Indeed, I think the parallelism is too close and detailed as to make the hypothesis of fortuitous coincidence too unlikely to deserve serious consideration, even without the tell-tale 1845 note.

I suspect, however, that Poe had by that time been long acquainted with the wake scene in Macnish's narrative. Indeed, the evidence of the influence of the femicide story on some of his earliest sketches is quite compelling. "Berenice," for example, originally published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in March 1835, already contains some details that indicate Poe's acquaintance with the second part of *Confessions*, namely the fact of the narrator Egæus being haunted by the specter of an unidentified dark-haired woman whom he unaccountably confuses with the blonde Berenice. Still, the resemblance with the original femicide story is fairly generic, especially when we compare this tale with "Ligeia." I suspect this has a very simple explanation. By 1835, Poe would have to presume the author of *Confessions*, whoever he was, still lived. By 1838, however, the situation was different.

Again, the mysterious note in *The New World* proves misleading. Although the Macphun pamphlet had then been, as before stated, long out of print, a new edition of Macnish's tale was then available in England, under a slightly different title, "The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide." This was included in the second volume of *The Modern Pythagorean*, the collection of Macnish's literary remains edited by his friend Moir, and published by Blackwood, editor of the famous magazine of the same name. The book is dated 1838, but was, judging from some newspaper ads, available by the end of the previous year. Poe, who kept a close watch on the English literary scene, and had a particular interest in all things *Blackwood*, as his "How to Write a Blackwood Magazine" shows, would not miss *The Modern Pythagorean*, which was titled after Macnish's Blackwood persona. Poe must have learned then the secret of the authorship of the tale, which was there made public for the first time. One thing is certain, after the news of Macnish's death was divulged, he certainly borrowed more freely than before from his work, presumably

because he felt that the likelihood of his borrowing from that source being detected, which was never very great, had now been drastically reduced.

The intention of presenting “other similar contributions from the same source,” manifested by the writer of *The New World* note on “Ligeia,” suggests that Poe would continue to borrow from Macnish. Indeed, some scholars have seen the influence of the “Modern Pythagorean”’s *Blackwood* sketches in some of Poe’s tales written both before and after Ligeia. Maxwell Morton, in *A Builder of the Beautiful* (1928), called attention to the resemblance between some portions of “Bon-Bon” (1832), “Lionizing” (1835), two of the tales in the so-called Folio Club series, and “The Devil in the Belfry” (1839), on the one side, and three of the sketches the Modern Pythagorean contributed to *Blackwood’s* during the course of 1826, the year in which he made his debut in the magazine: “Metempsychosis,” “Man With the Nose,” and “The Barber of Gottingen,” respectively. Realizing that his find brought into question the already well-established critical myth of Poe’s “originality,” Morton remarked: “If Poe is the father of the short-story, Dr. Robert Macnish, M. D., LL.D. (the ‘Modern Pythagorean’), may, perhaps, be regarded as one of its grandfathers;” but thought Macnish had been an inspiration only for “the grotesqueries of the American,” that is, for his openly satirical pieces (39). Much later, when he prepared his edition of Poe’s fiction, Mabbott accepted Morton’s suggestions. In 1975 Alexander Hammond considered Macnish’s influence on Poe was beyond dispute: “Poe’s knowledge of Macnish, who wrote his *Blackwood’s* tales under the pen name ‘A Modern Pythagorean,’ is established by the influence of ‘The [sic] Metempsychosis’ (...) on ‘Bon-Bon’” (“Further Notes on Poe’s Folio Club Tales” 48n8). In 1980, in *Popular Literature: Poe’s Not-so-Soon-Forgotten Lore*, J. Lasley Dameron convincingly argued the influence of a fourth tale, “Who can it Be?” (1827) on Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” (1841), thereby suggesting for the first time the influence of The Modern Pythagorean on Poe’s apparently serious tales—in fact,

Dameron's findings tend to dilute the conventional classification of Poe's work in two groups, the serious and the "grotesque."<sup>29</sup>

The fact remains, however, that no systematic study of Macnish's influence on Poe has ever been attempted. This is unfortunate, as Macnish may be the link between Poe's innovative prose fiction and the British magazinists. Indeed, the Scottish writer foreshadows some of the most innovative aspects of Poe's method. For example, his shifting of focus from the originality of the material to the novelty of its treatment. When he was told that his "Who can it Be?" was an imitation of Washington Irving's "The Stout Gentleman," indeed, rather than repudiating the allegation, Macnish told his friend Moir: "I flatter myself that the execution is entirely my own, and as different as possible from Irving's very admirable performance" (Moir, *The Modern Pythagorean* 1:56). This is something one imagines Poe himself could have said.

And there are other, more subtle affinities between Macnish and Poe that I also find significant. As Karl Miller remarked, Macnish belonged, with James Hogg, to "a kind of avant-garde" which "helped to domicile" the German tale of horror in Scotland, and by extension in the English-speaking world (*Cockburn's Millenium* 208, 206).<sup>30</sup> Poe too was, even in his life-time, regarded as an adapter of the German horror story. Macnish's work, and his literary persona in particular, also foreshadows Poe's treatment of the theme of the double—itsself of German ancestry—in connection with metempsychosis. Indeed, the origin of the former's pen name was his first *Blackwood's* tale, "Metempsychosis," which is quintessentially Poesque, *avant la lettre*: "Macnish was a Pythagorean, or Metempsychosist by virtue of his humorous of fanciful use of Pythagoras's

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29 Here is the relevant passage: "Macnish, a popular writer of tales as well as a physician, contributed fiction to *Blackwood's* that would have interested Poe. Macnish's tale 'Who Can It Be?,' appearing in *Blackwood's* for October, 1827, is similar to Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' (...) in that the narrator experiences the anguish of a searching curiosity" (Dameron, *Popular Literature* 8-9).

Bruce I. Weiner, in "'That Metaphysical Art:' Mystery and Detection in Poe's Tales," published in 1986, also discusses the influence of "Who Can it Be?" on Poe's "The Man of the Crowd." Regarding Poe's acquaintance with Macnish's fiction, the author has the following to say: "There is no mention of Macnish or his fiction in Poe's works, but the American was a careful reader of *Blackwood's* and could not have failed to notice 'Who Can It Be?' or tales like it that Macnish published under the pseudonym A Modern Pythagorean" (33).

30 According to Miller, Macnish's "Metempsychosis" and *The Confessions* "are treatments of the double life, and both seem to be responding to Hogg's recently published [The Private Memoirs and] *Confessions [of a Justified Sinner]* and to the German subject-matter which it helped to domicile in Scotland" (*Cockburn's Millenium* 206).

doctrine of the transmigration of souls, a doctrine which could accommodate conjectures about the double nature of man,” Miller writes, adding that “the stories were unlikely to win converts to the teachings of Pythagoras” (203-204). The same author, commenting on Poe’s debt to Macnish, remarked that he too “was prepared to pose as a Metempsychosist” (213). Indeed, when Poe mentions “the modified Παλιγγενεσία of the Pythagoreans” in “Morella,” a tale where the narrator is concerned with the deep mysteries of personal identity—even while living a mockery of marriage with his own child—he is probably paying homage to his obscure predecessor. Still, I insist, Macnish’s single most important contribution to Poe’s work is the femicide narrator.

By the time “Ligeia” was published in the *New World*, in February 1845, Dr. Macnish had been dead for more than seven years. But he was not yet completely forgotten. As I am sure Poe knew, a second edition of Moir’s memoir and anthology of Macnish had appeared in London the previous year, under a different title: *Tales, Essays, and Sketches*. Still, Poe could well afford the sly hint in *The New World*. He knew that the average reader, and even the “enterprising publishers,” would not bother to look his allusion up, and so he must have felt that his secret was fairly safe for the time being. Hopefully, someone would eventually get the joke. He is as proud of his handiwork as the narrator of *The Black Cat* (another femicide, incidentally), and equally confident in his ability to conceal his crime. The narrator of that tale recommends to the police’s attention the craftsmanship of the wall into the substance of which he had integrated the body of his victim, even going so far as to strike it with his cane. Likewise, Poe encourages the reader to admire the text into the substance of which he had mixed his original. Like his fictional femicide, the author wants to get caught, only he *knows* it.

The revelation, however, should not come too soon, lest the tale be banished for its lack of originality. The crime must be hidden, yes, but not too well-hidden, for the author’s hope of divulging a complete picture of his “high artistic skill” depends on the clues he leaves behind. Without them, in other words, no one would ever know how clever Poe really had been. The

apparent sincerity of the narrator, which is essential to the hoax, is also part of the disguise that enables the writer to appear absolutely original, and cover up his debts to other writers. In one of several reviews he did of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, published in *Godey's Lady's Book* for November 1847, Poe wrote that the "most vitally important point in fiction" is "that of earnestness or verisimilitude," implying that the semblance of truth of a fiction depends on its tone (Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1847] 583).<sup>31</sup> A few years earlier, an anonymous review of his own *Tales*, probably written, or at least suggested by Poe himself and published in the *Aristidean* in October, 1845, defined "earnestness" as the appearance of "sincerity:"<sup>32</sup> "A writer must have the fullest belief in his statements, or must simulate that belief perfectly, to produce an absorbing interest in the mind of his reader" (873). Of the two, however, the second, the ability to simulate "sincerity," is regarded as the most artistic: "That power of simulation can only be possessed by a man of high genius" (Poe, rev. of *Tales* 873). The true measure of a writer's art was, therefore, his ability to simulate opinions he did not share. This was, of course, the exact opposite of the Romantic belief that sincerity could be intuitively recognised.

In fact, this brings all literature under suspicion. If a writer really can "simulate" as perfectly as Poe suggests, how can we distinguish the simulator from the authentic article? Another important question emerges from this idea of literature as "earnest" simulation. How can an ambitious author of a first-person "earnest" narrative ever hope to display his art? Poe solves this problem by, first,

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31 I quote this review from the reprint in the Library of America's volume of Poe's *Essays and Reviews*, organised by G. R. Thompson, where the original title, "Tale Writing—Nathaniel Hawthorne," is omitted.

32 Thomas Olive Mabbott attributed the review to Thomas Dunn English, then editor of the *Aristidean*, who at the time was still on good terms with Poe, but qualifies his statement so as to make the attribution merely nominal: "Dr. English had undoubtedly discussed the story with Poe, but probably had included ideas of his own" (*Tales* 1:395 emphasis mine).

Subsequent editors have thought best to regard this review as the work of Poe himself. G. R. Thompson includes it among Poe's critical work both in the collection of his *Essays and Reviews* he prepared for The Library of America and in the anthology *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe* for Norton Critical Editions, adding in a footnote to the last mentioned that: "Most scholars believe that Poe wrote a good deal of this review and planted it with Thomas Dunn English for the latter's magazine, the *Aristidean*, for October 1845" (Thompson, *Selected Writings* 670n1).

The website of the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore contains a very good discussion of the debate about the authorship of this piece. Based on the arguments of William Doyle Hull, the editor also cautiously attributes the review to Poe: "It is certain (...) that Poe contributed in some way since it does, as previously noted, contain details known only to Poe" (Poe Society of Baltimore, "Notes").

ridiculing his narrator, as it were, behind his back, and then broadcasting different kinds of clues in the text, namely bibliographical riddles, that document the writer's deliberate labor of composition. Thus, the visionary cluelessness of the narrator, which has been repeatedly, and erroneously attributed to Poe, is exposed as a parody of the Romantic mythology of creation.

In this sense, the anonymous review of Poe's *Tales* is a warning to the reader. We are told that the power of simulation that characterises the highest genius was "possessed by Mr. POE, in its full perfection" (Poe, Rev. of *Tales* 873). This, of course, was the same sort of power that Macnish had displayed. Not surprisingly, we find here for the first time the opinion Poe himself would later privately communicate to Philip Pendleton Cooke and Duyckink, that "Ligeia" (which, much to his chagrin, had not been included in the collection) was his best tale<sup>33</sup>. This reviewer is, I think, not a stranger to us. We recognise here the hand of the trickster that wrote the note in *The New World*, that is, of the great simulator himself.

The author of "Ligeia" certainly deserves the high praise that is here bestowed upon him. He reveals himself, at the narrator's expense, as a skilled and prudent thief, who pilfers from the work of his contemporaries only that which no one is likely to miss, and then takes care to make the purloined wares appear as "original" as possible when he replaces them on the market. The proof of his crime of voluntary imitation is the text itself, into the very substance of which he mixes the *corpus delicti*, that is, the many evidently conscious borrowings. This *corpus delicti*, indeed, is everywhere noticeable on the surface of his apparently idiosyncratic tale—on the text, that is—, but, of course, no trace of it can be found in the unfathomable depths of metaphysical speculation in

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33 "The Fall of the House of Usher" "is an elaborate tale—surpassed only by 'Ligeia,' in our judgment" (Poe, rev. of *Tales* 870).

Shortly thereafter, in a letter dated January 8, 1846 (Letter 223), Poe would express the same high opinion of the tale to Duyckinck, who he was trying to interest in publishing a new edition of *Tales*, which never materialised: "Would not Mr. Wiley give me, say, \$50, in full for the copyright of the collection I now send. It is a far better one than the first—containing, for instance, 'Ligeia,' which is undoubtedly the best story I have written" (*Letters* 550).

A few months after this exchange, Poe would complain to Cooke, in a letter dated August 9, 1846 (Letter 240) about Duyckinck's decision to exclude "Ligeia" from *Tales* (1845) (see note 18 to this chapter).

"Ligeia" was also the first of a list of "my best tales" that Poe included in the famous account of himself he had given James Russell Lowell in a letter dated July 2, 1844 (*Letters* 450).

which the narrator plunges the reader.<sup>34</sup> The “earnestness” with which Poe delivers the opinions of his narrator is the pinnacle of that art of simulation in which he had, indeed, no rival, and this art is the cover that allowed him to denounce the Romantic fiction of originality from within. Indeed, the tale demonstrates that sincerity can indeed be simulated.

Like the note that accompanied it in *The New World*, “Ligeia” is a riddle. Once we find its solution, we cannot understand how we could have missed it before. At the same time, we cannot help but admire the skill of the riddle-maker, who managed to divert our attention from the obvious clues by sending us on a wild goose chase through the profound regions where truth is sought but never found.

The anti-romantic rhetoric of Poe’s special hoax was, therefore, carefully disguised under a cloak of “earnest” Romanticism, which has tricked almost everyone—even some of the shrewdest critics of the last century. Yvor Winters, who by the way intensely disliked Poe, however, was perhaps the first to realise how extreme Poe’s Romanticism was. In fact, I believe Winters’s intuitions are invariably sound. He once wrote Poe was “pushing certain essential romantic notions very nearly as far as they could go” (Winters, *Edgar Allan Poe* 260). I think he was almost right. Poe pushed them, in reality, much farther than that. He took these notions much, much farther than any even moderately reasonable person would take them, stretching them until they snapped. And that was the point. His narrator is not a reasonable person and, Poe suggests, neither were those who could take him or his preposterous “Romanticism” seriously.

Strictly speaking, a hoax is a fiction that poses as fact. “Ligeia,” however, follows the basic formal pattern of *Confessions*, which I have called a dishonest hoax. Both are ostensible fictions designed to trick the unwary reader into believing the morally repulsive narrator is a mouthpiece of the author, while hinting to the more sophisticated that this is not the case. Poe’s narrator, indeed, is

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<sup>34</sup> The wall of the cellar in “The Black Cat” may well be a deliberate allegory of this artistic “plagiarism.” Indeed, there is reason to believe that the substance of the *corpus delicti*, that is, the body of the narrator’s wife, is not wholly *within* the wall; some of it may be present, perhaps even visible on the surface, just as a figure of cat had mysteriously appeared on the wall of the narrator’s bedroom after he had hanged Pluto the black cat. In the next section I present my reading of that tale as a femicide story.

almost as obtrusively evil as his predecessor. He combines an apparently harmless tendency for visionary mysticism, which was common enough in those days, with a far from endearing propensity for misogyny. He admits he “loathed” his second wife, Rowena, “with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man” (Poe, “Ligeia” 323). He hated, that is, for no apparent reason.

And from the very start he treated Rowena as an object. He admittedly buys her from her aristocratic but impoverished male relatives, and receives her in a secluded room of a tower in an isolated and decrepit old English abbey, which he had decorated with funereal, phantasmagoric, and generally unwholesome devices. She was the prop that completed the Gothic scenario he prepared. The narrator even admits that terrorizing her gave him pleasure. Some critics even think he may actually have poisoned her, and there are certainly a number of circumstances that point towards that conclusion.

The unfavorable impression produced by the narrator’s appalling treatment of Rowena, however, is apparently contradicted by the way he talks about Ligeia. Indeed, as we have already seen, many have suggested that he descended into madness after his loss, and that this mitigated his guilt. He keeps telling us how much he regrets the loss of Ligeia, his first wife, for whose death he feels responsible. It appears he was still mourning *her* during his second marriage. Indeed, it was certainly *her* he mourned in *Rowena*’s wake, and he mourns her still as he writes his tale. Thus, he conveys the impression that he does not despise *all* women, but only women such as Rowena. This implied comparison between the two leads to the cruel suggestion that some women deserve to live, and others do not. In other words, the narrator gives us to understand that not *all* women deserve to be locked where the sun never shines and terrorised out of their wits—but some do. This is an implicitly misogynous sentiment, no question about it; yet, most people have concluded that Poe was *fundamentally* on his narrator’s side. Perhaps he had gone crazy after losing Ligeia, which most critics have regarded as a symbol of the narrator’s insight into the world of the Ideal. Thus, they



thought, the narrator was respectable in a way. In reality, the narrator's "love" for "Ligeia" actually confirms that, for him, the only good woman is a dead woman. In this sense, he and William the femicide represent exactly the same kind of male sensibility; a sensibility that amounts, in practice, to violent hostility toward all live women. For these men loved these *dead* women, by their own admission, only after they were dead.

The author of the femicide story signals that the moral his narrator extracts from the events he describes, and which is implied in the ostensible "thesis" of the tale, is a symptom of the propensities that made him kill women in the first place. Another way of discrediting the narrator is making him acknowledge remorse for the wrong things. William, for example, literally worships the memory of his blonde sister: "I raised, in the burying-ground, a monument to Eliza's memory. It was of marble and of virgin whiteness—an emblem of her own purity," hence, a reminder of the impurity, as he saw it, of her friend Mary (Macnish, *Confessions* 22). Indeed, the reverence the narrator shows to his "monument" tacitly reiterates the disparagement of the pregnant woman he had stabbed in the back. On their way to or from the church, he writes, people "would point to it (...) and tell how I had broken her [Eliza's] heart—how I had destroyed her friend—and how, as a memento to her [Eliza's] worth, I had caused this sepulchral column to be raised" (23). In "Ligeia," Poe merely inverts the color-scheme and the chronology. His narrator worships the entombed dark lady and despises the recently deceased blonde.

The narrators' feelings of remorse do not prompt any revision of the rigid dualism of their concept of womanhood. They keep forcing their women into either of the two equally dehumanised poles of a double bind. They perceive them either as fleshless angels or emblems of carnality. Death only can certify the purity of the first class of women, and those who betray their "humanity" also end up dead. It simply is not safe to be a woman around the femicide. And, inasmuch as they continue to adhere to this belief system, which the tale denounces as a form of superstition, they remain femicides throughout—this is their character. In William case, we are forced to conclude, I

think, that he is not a reformed femicide, as he claims. In “Ligeia” it is the other way around—the narrator had always been a femicide. Indeed, I would argue that the hints of this crime are the reason why the tale has always made readers in general, and critics in particular, uncomfortable.

This uneasy feeling depends on identification, or sympathy. This narrator is not that different from the average male writer of his time—this is what gives the tale its “tone of truth.” His opinions are believable, and this naturally tends to suggest this was the way the author himself felt about women. But then, this identification is disturbed by the fact of the narrator being a femicide, which raises some disturbing questions. If this is so, then perhaps the author was himself a femicide without knowing it. Come to think of it, perhaps all men that speak and feel like this are potential femicides. This, I think, is what lies at the bottom of all the uneasy feeling the tale generates. This is precisely the impression the femicide story is calculated to produce; we might call it the femicide effect.

Theoretically, of course, the first readers of Macnish’s hoax did not know it was not real and would therefore not be concerned with conjecturing the author’s motives. But the difference is not as great as it sounds. The editorial note that preceded the first part of the tale in the *Standard* of London, and which later appeared in all the American editions I could trace, contained the following specimen of double-talk:

A deeply affecting narrative, under the above title, has just issued from the Glasgow press. It is declared to be “no fiction.” It is published according to the will of ‘*Mr\*\*r, Esq., of — , in the county of Stirling, Scotland,*’ for the purpose of deterring others ‘from the commission of a similar sin, by the thought, that if they escape the punishment of the law, they are sure to meet with that of a racked and harassed conscience.’ The *Confessions* are powerfully written, and seldom have we read a more touching narrative than that, which is contained in the work before us.

(Editorial)

What I find most remarkable about this text is the editor's scruple to commit himself to the authenticity of the story, which forms a striking contrast with his lack of scruple in praising the quality of the article. Not only is it "powerfully written," the gruesome tale of violence is described as "deeply affecting," and, indeed, as one of the most "touching narratives" the editor has ever seen. This is too much. Obviously, no editor would publish such a statement if he truly suspected it to be a true story. Whoever wrote this knew the story was *not* real, and slyly but effectively intimated this to the reader. I suspect Macphun was behind the whole campaign, and may have written these statements himself.

Macphun may also have had something to do with the references to the *Confessions* in a serial published by the short-lived Glasgow magazine *The Ant*, "The Heron Correspondence," which was a sort of satirical review of current events focusing on Scottish literature and gossip. The first of these references, dated August 11, 1827, is, as far as I know, the first public mention of Macnish's hoax.<sup>35</sup> In a *post scriptum* to one of his letters, Charles Heron—the protagonist of the series—recommends to his cousin—hence to the readers of the *Ant*—the story of William the femicide: "I am able to send (...) a copy of a very extraordinary little work which appears here on Saturday. Its title is a startling one (...) but if you are not frightened by that from its perusal, you will find (...) some very powerful language, clothing fearful and towering thoughts" (Heron, "to his Cousin Mary" 216). Macphun could not have wished for better publicity for his latest publication, which had apparently appeared on the previous Saturday, August 4, 1827.

The concluding sentence in Heron's notice of the little book provides further indication that the redaction of *The Ant* was part of the conspiracy. "It is," Heron admits, "an odd enough present to a lady, but you are so blue, that you would not forgive a neglect that would shelter itself under some quibble of excessive nicety" (Heron, "To his Cousin Mary" 216). In the September 8, 1827 issue of *The Ant*, the Heron persona once again promotes *Confessions*, mentioning a second edition, and

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<sup>35</sup> In fact, it is the earliest reference to the tale, public or private, that I could find. The letter in which Macnish acquainted his future biographer, Moir, with the publication is dated August 13.

playfully hinting the author's identity: "I agree with Mr. M'—— in tracing a certain resemblance between its best passages and a certain clever orator's *Sterling* style. He was, even before he left Glasgow, a lady killer, you know" (Heron, "To his Brother William" 278). Obviously, *The Ant* never doubted *The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide* was a fiction.

The day after the first half of the tale had appeared in *The Standard*, *The Mercury* of Liverpool published the entire narrative. In place of the short note that had appeared in the London paper, it was accompanied by a long editorial statement which purported to guarantee the authenticity of the narrative, but actually showed why it could be nothing but a fiction, and even explained that the writer of a story of this kind would have no choice but to present it as fact:

We have given it [the Confessions] entire in a preceding page;<sup>36</sup> and, as many of our readers, after perusal, are apt to conclude, as we at first did, that 'The Confessions of a Femicide' is a work of pure fiction, it is incumbent upon us to explain the reasons which induced us to arrive at a different conclusion. Mr. Macphun is a gentleman of great respectability, and we felt convinced that he would not have deliberately palmed upon the public, as true, a horrid and appalling story, which had no foundation in fact. There would have been no excuse for such conduct, as he possessed the means of detecting the imposture, by ascertaining whether any murder had taken place in Scotland, twenty years ago, under the extraordinary circumstances described in Mr. Macphun's narrative. He might also, with very little trouble, have traced out the register of the alleged trial. These were the reasons that lead us to conclude that the story, shocking and unnatural as it is, could not be wholly destitute of foundation in fact. ("Confessions of a Femicide" 272)

Thus, while stating that the narrative *may* be a fiction, the editor proceeds to give the reader the strongest possible incentive—short of a direct avowal—to regard the tale as such:

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<sup>36</sup> In fact, in the preceding page, 271.

We also thought, that if the story had been entirely a romance, the author would not have ventured to make his principal character so thorough-paced a villain; for, however strange the assertion may appear, it is a melancholy truth, that more unnatural crimes have been perpetrated in reality than any writer of fiction has had the hardihood to introduce into romance. If any author were to found a story upon the circumstances of a father cutting off his own child's head, his readers would turn with disgust from so gratuitous an outrage upon feeling and probability. Sheen, however, did in reality cut off the head of his own child; and did that act, too, in a sane state of mind, if we may so conclude from the judge suffering him, after his acquittal, to go at large. ("Confessions of a Femicide" 272)

Macphun would include most of the previous statement, including the passages I transcribed, in the advertisements of *Confessions* as well as the fourth edition of his pamphlet. This text was probably written by Macphun himself, or at least according to his instructions. It is clear, in any case, that *The Mercury* perfectly understood the spirit of the hoax.

Femicide was, judging from the history of the publication of *Confessions*, a hot subject. In fact, it would appear that the stringent notions of decorum then prevalent made it almost *too* hot to handle. In order to publish such a terrible story, it is implied, the editor had to signal his deference to the supposed "nicety" of the public, by presenting it as a true story, and concealing the identity of the author. Charles Heron, of the Glasgow *Ant*, had before suggested that the female readership, in particular, was thought too sensitive for such crude literary fare.

This highlights the political significance of the public campaign surrounding *Confessions*. The fact that the killing is detected in the story, but its perpetrator not convicted, brings into question the effectiveness of the judicial system. But there is something in the hoax that goes well beyond this typical sensationalist device. It also exposes a contrast, very unflattering for the society of that time—and unfortunately, also of ours—between the severity of the treatment a writer who

feigned the character of femicide was likely to receive, and the high probability of the actual criminal avoiding punishment. The detected femicide was likely to evade punishment for a crime the fictional depiction of which would not fail to be punished.

Macnish's story, precisely because it is made up, bespeaks a will to bring out the hypocrisy of a system of morality that protects women from depictions of a crime of which they are the potential victims, but, precisely by subjecting them to the supervision of men, actually drastically reduces their ability to protect themselves from male aggressors. Macnish says he wanted to make "folks stare a little," but that is an obvious understatement. In the final analysis the fact that women are denied the status of citizenship is shown to be the condition under which men like William, which regard women as essentially *inhuman*, may thrive. In a small way, Macnish and Macphun plotted to create nothing short of a femicide scare.

Of course, we must not take this play of masks too seriously. The identification of the author of the tale would probably not expose him to prosecution or cause him any serious trouble. Still, Dr. Macnish, the physician, felt that it would not be good for his professional reputation, on which his livelihood depended, to own the story. However, Macphun and him actually hoped the disguise was thin enough that most readers could see through it. The identity of the author might be a secret, but the fictional nature of the narrative had been obvious enough from the start. This clever strategy of fake disguise, exposing the over-nice morals of the establishment to derision, forcefully demonstrated that the moral character of the author was independent from that of the characters in whose shoes he decided to step. In all this, Macnish foreshadows Poe, who often "simulates" in his tales, without ever getting out of character, the sentiments of a superstitious, guilt-ridden criminal. Frequently, and sometimes provokingly, he also reminded his readers that it was risky to base judgments about the personal morals and conduct of an author solely on his fiction: "[W]hat has cutting the throat of our grandmother to do with our poem," he once asked the "Frogpondians" (Poe, "Editorial Miscellany" 315).

This is not to say that a story like *Confessions*, told from the point of view of a character that was sure to offend the public's moral sense, is necessarily amoral, that is, meant to bring into question the validity of moral judgments in general. On the contrary, as indicated by the title, the outlook of the narrator is distinctly moral. Indeed, there is an implied moral to the femicide's telling of his story that the reader is called upon to validate. The question, therefore, is not whether there is a moral to the tale, but whether one has to accept that which the narrator extracts from his own case. The note in *The Mercury*, by signaling that the tale was a fiction, intimated that the author had made his character as "thorough-paced villain" as he possibly could to show the reader that this moral should be rejected. And then, the implied moral itself is, as we have seen, itself repulsive. This is perfectly captured by the note that accompanied the poem entitled "The Femicide" in the *Casket*, in which it was alleged that *Confessions* depicted the "catastrophe of female error" (141n). Thus, the author of the poem resorts to the same kind of rhetoric that Macnish himself had used, pushing patriarchal morality to unacceptable extremes.

Worse scoundrels than William had, of course, been depicted in fables that were unquestionably designed to enforce the sort of ideology he endorses. But the femicide story distinguishes itself from such fables precisely by the absence of an unambiguous statement of what might be termed the male moral of the story. Take for example Perrault's famous fairy-tale, "La Barbe Bleue" (1695). The title-character forbids his seventh wife, under penalty of death, of entering a mysterious locked room, but leaves the key within her reach to tempt her. Unable to resist her curiosity, however, she opens the forbidden door. Within, she finds the corpses of her blue-beard's six previous wives, whom he had murdered. Then, as her husband is about to execute the punishment he had decreed, she is saved by the timely intervention of her brothers, who promptly slay the exposed serial-femicide. Being a fable, the tale is capped by an authoritative explanation of its moral: "La curiosité, malgré tous ses attraits, / Coûte souvent bien des regrets; / On en voit tous les jours milles exemples paraître. / C'est, n'en déplaise au sexe, un plaisir bien léger; / Dès qu'on

le prend il cesse d'être, / Et toujours il coûte trop cher" (Perrault, *Contes* 128). The author, of course, does not condone femicide, and the terrible Blue Beard gets his just deserts. The moral offered, however, contradicts the modern reader's tendency to focus on *his* behavior. It is the behavior of his victims that Perrault is interested in decrying.

A second "moralité" reiterates that the tale is not directed at potential male aggressors, but at their victims: "Pour peu qu'on ait l'esprit sensé, / Et que du Monde on sache le grimoire, / On voit bientôt que cette histoire / Est un conte du temps passé; / Il n'est plus d'Époux si terrible, / Ni qui demande l'impossible, / Fût-il malcontent et jaloux. / Près de sa femme on le voit filer doux; / Et de quelque couleur que sa barbe puisse être, / On a peine à juger qui des deux est le maître" (Perrault, *Contes* 129). According to this, the femicide is extinct. Men, it is implied, are now thoroughly civilised. Women, on the other hand, are depicted as being naturally indiscreet beings who live in a sort of perpetual childhood, and are therefore presented as being in permanent need of fables. In any case, according to Perrault's preface, his tales "tend à porter les femmes à souffrir de leurs maris, et à faire voir qu'il n'y en a point de si brutal ni de si bizarre, dont la patience d'une honnête femme ne puisse venir à bout" (5). Such tales as "La Barbe Bleue" are, therefore, designed to induce women to obey their husbands implicitly. The tale therefore applies to domestic affairs the same theory that justified absolute rule in public matters, in the understanding that the only alternative to unquestioned authority is chaos. Women, not being equipped to hold that authority, it is implied, must be submissive—and hope for the best. Like William the femicide, therefore, the author of "La Barbe Bleue" tacitly construes the protagonist's crimes as the "catastrophe of female error."

I have previously defined the Gothic as a kind of fiction which is characterised by the assumption of an ostensibly superstitious perspective, usually projected on an alien setting. In this sense, Perrault's may be said to have anticipated the Gothic with his "blue beard" tale. Such cruel and tyrannical men *used to exist* "once upon a time," but *now* only survive in stories designed to scare women into obedience. In the Gothic proper, however, the boundary between rationality and



superstition is by no means as clear. There the reader is challenged to discern the motives of the author from the superstition, and this creates a radical duplicity. This duplicity created the impression that the Gothic setting was not as remote as it seemed. It was not as easy to dismiss the blue-beard-like characters of Ann Radcliffe to the world of fairy tales. One got the sneaking suspicion they were, in fact, modern men in Gothic disguise.

I argued also that the femicide story may be regarded as a particular instance of the Gothic, in which the protagonist-narrator displays a set of beliefs concerning women that are implicitly represented as a form of superstition. The femicide story, in other words, is designed to show that the opinions of the modern femicide that narrates it are as “Gothic” as those of his blue-bearded predecessors. In other words, by bringing bluebeard to the present Macnish confirms the impression one got from Radcliffe’s novels, that the Gothic tyrant had not vanished from the earth. The author of *Confessions* does not say so, of course, but he *shows* it to his reader, by making the femicidal superstition of his narrator apparent.

By a similar reasoning, one might describe a tale like “La Barbe Bleu” as a “Gothic fable.” Such fables contain an explicit, official moral, that is conveyed through the authoritative voice of the non-participating narrator. Through this moral, which presupposes a patriarchal outlook, the fable defines itself as a male story. It should be noticed that this official reading, which is imposed on the reader, is perfectly aligned with the views of the femicide blue-bearded protagonist. Indeed, his tale reinforces an overarching narrative about gender according to which the role of men is to tempt women into error. Indeed, the official moral reiterates blue-beard’s notion that women are constitutionally unable to resist their curiosity, and that this curiosity is reproachable, and deserves punishment—according to this notion, blue-beard’s mistake was that of asking his wives the impossible. Instead of tempting them into an error for which they should be punished but which they cannot possibly resist for the sake of satisfying his cruelty, it is implied, he should have taken care to preserve them from temptation. In short, without questioning the position of the husband as

the absolute ruler of the household, Perrault suggests that this power should be exerted with paternal benignity.

As I understand it, the femicide story is a subversive “Gothic fable” which distinguishes itself from its “straight” counterparts, like “La barbe bleu,” by having no official moral. Instead, the femicide, becoming the narrator of his own story, uses this position to impose his moral “thesis,” which is corroded by the moral implied by the tale, considered as a work of fiction, and which, being implied, is nonetheless as strictly coded. The trick, indeed, is to make the reader understand that the narrator’s outlook is *too* distorted for this to have escaped the author. This difference between the femicide story and the Gothic fable is clearly displayed by the way the texts themselves define their readership. Whereas “La Barbe Bleue” is specifically addressed to the victims of a crime that no longer exists, women, Macnish’s femicide decided to write his *Confessions*, as we have seen, “to the effect that others may be deterred from the commission of a similar sin” (Macnish, *Confessions* 3). He writes, therefore, for potential femicides, that is, for men.

In addition to the many evident nods to Macnish’s *Confessions* which show that this was the main source of “Ligeia,” which defined its peculiar structure and tone, the tale counts among its buried sources, as I have before indicated, other femicide stories including Dickens’s “Madman’s Manuscript” and Bulwer-Lytton’s “A Manuscript in a Madhouse,” whose protagonists-narrators share important characteristics with Ligeia’s husband, and which distinguish them all from William.

Bulwer-Lytton’s “madman,” for example, is incredibly learned, and excessively proud of it—a trait he shares with the narrators of many of Poe’s tales, namely “Berenice,” “Morella,” and “Ligeia.” He also had a dreadfully deformed body—in fact, he was a monster. When he was on the point of resigning himself to a life of solitude, he chanced to overhear some young women who were debating an age-old question, in a manner reminiscent of the proceedings of the mythical medieval courts of love: was mental beauty enough to inspire love, when the body was deformed? One of the girls answered in the affirmative: she would love a monster, provided he displayed

“genius and affection” (Bulwer-Lytton, “Manuscript” 59).<sup>37</sup> Encouraged by this statement, the narrator approached her. Like the damsels of old romance, she sent her suitor on a quest, the completion of which would prove him worthy of her. But, instead of proving his valor in battle, the lover was required to prove his intellectual merit: “Go,—pour forth your knowledge to the crowd; go, gain the glory of fame—the glory which makes man immortal—and then come back, and claim me,—I will be yours!” (62). After completing his quest for fame, the narrator “sought a meeting under the same mystery and conditions of old:”

I claimed my reward! And in the depth and deadness of night, when not a star crept through the curtain of cloud and gloom—when not a gleam struggled against the blackness—not a breath stirred the heavy torpor around us—that reward was yielded. The dense woods and the eternal hills were the sole witness of our bridal; —and girt with darkness as with a robe, she leaned upon my bosom, and shuddered not at the place of her repose! (Bulwer-Lytton, “Manuscript” 63)

Incredibly, the protagonist’s partner never saw her lover while they consummated their marriage. “Thus only,” that is, in total darkness, “we met;—but for months we *did* meet, and I was blessed” (Bulwer-Lytton “Manuscript” 64). Nature taking its usual course, a pregnancy resulted from these clandestine interviews, which forced the couple to formalise their union. During the ceremony, and only then, the bride and her family finally saw the groom. “*She* had prepared to them to see a distorted and fearful abortion,—but—ha! ha! ha!—she had not prepared them to see *me!*” (64). The bride herself collapsed when she finally saw the narrator, and died soon after giving birth to “a dead—but beautiful likeness of myself,” as the narrator, who had likened himself to an “abortion,” puts it (65).

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37 Bulwer-Lytton’s tale appeared originally in *The Literary Souvenir* for 1829, which was, of course, published in late 1828. Poe probably read the tale, however, in an American anthology of the author’s earlier sketches published in 1832, *Conversations with an Ambitious Student in Ill Health: With Other Pieces*, which, “as George E. Woodberry first observed, plays a substantial role in the composition of ‘Lionizing’ and other early Folio Club stories” (Alexander Hammond, “Poe’s ‘Lionizing’” 155).

Here the contrast with Macnish's *Confessions* is significant. In that tale, the immediate cause of the death of the narrator's pregnant lover was the former's *moral* deformity, which Bulwer-Lytton ostensibly replaced with physical monstrosity. On the other hand, the "madman"'s necrophilia is even more conspicuous and exuberant than that of his predecessor's. "Verily," says he, "it is a glorious mirth, to behold the only thing one loves stiff, and white, and shrunken, and food for the red, playful, creeping worm! (...) I carried them into the wood. I concealed them [the bodies of his wife and his stillborn child] in a cavern—I watched over them—and lay beside them, —and played with the worms—that played with them—ha! ha! ha!—it was a jovial time that, in the old cavern!" (Bulwer-Lytton, "Manuscript" 66). Thus, the narrator performs the role of husband in a gruesome make-belief marriage, using the corpses of his wife and child as props. Here is a man who may truly be said to have loved the dead. Of course, Bulwer-Lytton suggests that he lost his mind at that point. Indeed, a man must be truly mad who laughs *in writing*—for one must not forget that this is a manuscript. This love for the dead is something the narrator of this tale shares with his homologues in "Ligeia" and *Confessions*. His love, however, is much more exuberant, as befits a certified lunatic. Indeed, both Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton used "madness" as an excuse to shock the public—the same role had been performed in Macnish's hoax by the "no fiction" disclaimer.

Mabbott points out that Poe lifted two scholarly-looking allusions from Bulwer-Lytton's tale for his "Ligeia."<sup>38</sup> These, together with some other details that add to the resemblance, form one of those covert allusions of which Poe was so fond, and by virtue of which the author forces the scholar to compare the two tales. The first of these allusions refers, in Poe's tale as in the original, to the otherworldly beauty of the dead wife's face. Ligeia's "was," her husband tells us, "the radiance of an opium dream—an airy and spirit-lifting vision more wildly divine than the phantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos" ("Ligeia" 311). The parallel between

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38 The bibliography dealing with Poe's borrowings from Bulwer-Lytton's work is very extensive. Alexander Hammond looks at this issue in the two articles mentioned in the Works Cited list. For an in-depth updated analysis of the question the reader is referred to Richard Kopley's "Poe's Taking of Pelham One Two Three Four Five Six," which discusses the more relevant bibliography.

Ligeia and the madman's wife is, indeed, obvious: "over the delicate and transparent paleness of her cheek," says the deformed narrator, "hung the wanness, but also the eloquence of thought. To other eyes she might not have been beautiful,—to mine, her face was an angel's.—Oh! lovelier far than the visions of the Carian, or the shapes that floated before the eyes of the daughters of Delos, is the countenance of one that bringeth to the dark breast the first glimmerings of Hope!" (Bulwer-Lytton, "Manuscript" 60).

Mabbott failed to realise, however, that this parallel signals a similarity in the narrators' feelings. They both praise their wife's beauty in very ambiguous terms, leaving the reader with the impression that they might, in fact, have been homely, if not downright uncomely. In fact, Bulwer-Lytton's narrator goes so far as to make the unkind suggestion that any woman that could overlook his monstrosity, no matter how ugly, would appear heavenly to him. Likewise, the narrator of "Ligeia," tells us that the "features" of the title-character "were not of that regular mould which we have been falsely taught to worship in the classical labors of the heathen" (Poe, "Ligeia" 311). In other words, she was no Venus—she only appeared so to him. Again, Poe's narrator says exactly what one of his predecessors had said, but using other words. This is a pattern in Poe's borrowings.

If ever I saw backhanded compliment, this is it. One may perhaps tolerate this kind of language from a man like Bulwer-Lytton's narrator: after all, he was a monster, and one must not be too hard on him. But what is Ligeia's husband excuse? Evidently, he is a monster too, but in the moral sense, as the second allusion Poe borrowed from Bulwer-Lytton's "A Manuscript Found in a Madhouse" suggests. Indeed, an allusion that referred, in the original, to the narrator's monstrosity, resurfaces in Poe's tale in what appears to be, at first, a totally different context, in the description of the phantasmagoric effect of Rowena's bridal chamber *on the narrator*. According to him, the arabesque designs on the curtains that covered walls, window, and furniture: "To one entering the room, bore the appearance of simple monstrosities," but, as the "the visiter" approached the centre of the room, assumed "the ghastly forms which belong to the superstition of the Norman" (Poe,

"Ligeia" 323). "In referring to the superstition of the Norman," Mabbott writes, "Poe has in mind Bulwer-Lytton's 'Manuscript Found in a Madhouse,' specifically the following sentence: 'I told her that I was more hideous than the demons which the imagination of a Northern savage had ever bodied forth' (Mabbott, *Tales* 1:334n27).

In this case, the allusion clearly suggests that the narrator of Poe's tale is, like Bulwer-Lytton's madman, a monster. Although he gives an impersonal form to his statements by using expressions like "one entering the room" and "the visiter," he is evidently describing his own experience in the phantasmagoric room; that is, he is describing the ghosts that haunted him in that weird chamber. And the allusion to Bulwer-Lytton suggests that these ghosts reflected the narrator's own monstrosity, that is, his crime; that he saw himself reflected in that phantasmagoria, without realising it. This, I believe, is the solution to the mystery of "Ligeia" to which everything in the tale points.

The terrible secret that the narrator attempts to conceal even from himself, is that he is the monster who killed both his wives. In this sense, Poe is more faithful to what I believe is the common model of all these tales, Macnish's femicide, than Bulwer-Lytton. Indeed, the femicide was metaphorically a monster; in Bulwer-Lytton's hands, he became literally a monster, and only metaphorically a femicide. With Poe, the monster regains his true shape.

Dickens's "madman" also never laid violent hands on his wife; however, unlike his fellow madman, he did plot femicide, and almost *executed* it. He was about to stab his wife in her sleep when she suddenly woke up. After this, he could not nerve himself to carry the plan through. The victim, however, though spared, never recovers from the shock. Having awoken to see her husband poised to plunge a dagger in her bosom, and therefore presumably scared of going to sleep, she dies of a nervous breakdown. The way Dickens' madman kills his wife without touching her seems to me a punning allusion to the title of the original tale.

“An Unexecuted Femicide” would also have been a fitting title for Dickens’s story, if we understand the word to refer to the act, and not the agent, and I believe the irony may have been intended. That is, the hero of the tale did kill his wife, although he did not “execute” his plan—in this sense, then, the “femicide” he plotted was “unexecuted.” In another sense of the word, the femicide—meaning the criminal—was unexecuted, for his crime was undetected and unpunished. Yet, as the narrator himself recognises, although things did not turn out as planned, “I had carried my object and killed her” (Dickens, “Madman” 142). The point Dickens appears to have tried to carry home was that the sort of psychological violence that killed the “madman’s” wife was very easily overlooked in a society where man’s authority over woman was generally regarded as the sacred pillar of morality. Women targeted by acts of extreme psychological violence, or even the overt threat of murder were, as I said before, not likely to get a divorce. The best they could expect from a system that was powerless to prevent the crime, and ineffective in deterring the criminal, was the posthumous redress of their wrongs. Indeed, the diagnosis returned by the doctors who observed the “madman’s” wife after her husband had attempted on her life was, at least in those days, perfectly within the bounds of probability. Indeed, their conclusion that *she* was mad, flows from the prejudice that regarded women as being constitutionally imbalanced, and therefore, unable to cope with the normal stresses of everyday life—a prejudice which is inherent to the use of the term “hysteria” in psychiatry. Thus, ideological bias and pseudo-scientific prejudices conspired against women who were subjected to psychological violence, by making their complaints automatically suspect.

By his own admission, Dickens’ “madman” would have remained at large had he not tried to kill his brother-in-law. Yet, like William, he did not escape the punishment of a guilty conscience. From the moment his wife died, he was visited by the ghost of his dark-haired and black-eyed victim, which forms the missing link between the ghost of Mary Elliston in Macnish’s *Confessions* and the phantasm of Ligeia. Thus, while the word “femicide” itself was absent from Dickens’s tale,

and with it anything that was likely to be legally recognised as such, this was clearly intended to highlight the shortcomings of the legal system.

Without an effort to understand the circumstances that determine it, however, this awkward silence about femicide could easily be taken for a confirmation of the misconception that femicide was unknown and unseen by our ancestors in the nineteenth century. With due allowance for conceptual, ideological, and cultural differences, the history I outlined briefly in the last few pages demonstrates conclusively that it was very much in the order of the day. Indeed, Macnish had struck a sensitive nerve in the collective consciousness of his time. The absence of overt depictions of the femicide character is not the result of indifference. On the contrary, it appears to have been a sort of hysterical reaction to a change in gender conceptions that was already under way. Not only was the problem in the collective consciousness, the paratext of the *Confessions* clearly intimates that everyone was talking about *it*, but also that it was getting increasingly dangerous for writers to print overt depictions of the crime.

It is to these very peculiar circumstances that Macnish's hoax responds. The wake in *Confessions* was a watered-down, ciphered version of the unspeakable horrors of the crypt scene in Matthew Lewis. As it turned out, however, it was still too shocking for most publishers. As we have seen, in America the critical scene had been almost universally omitted. Most publishers there had either neglected to locate the second part of the tale, or were themselves unwilling to risk scandal. In any case, the scene was virtually unknown to Poe's public. The challenge to American publishers which accompanied the publication of "Ligeia" in the *New World* shows that Poe was perfectly aware of this, and was taunting his colleagues in the publishing business for what was, at best, neglect, and at worse, misplaced delicacy.

In "Ligeia," Poe finally corrects this situation, putting the shocking scene of which the American public had been cheated back in circulation. Now, finally, they got to see it. But Poe cheated them too through skillful manipulation of their perceptions. The audience did get to see the



scene, but they did not understand what they saw—any more than the narrator of the tale recognised the ghosts that haunted him. By the time the ludicrous note about “Ligeia” I mentioned above came out, more than six years after the tale had originally been published, no one had yet detected Poe’s ingenious cover-up. There, Poe celebrated his triumph with yet another bold display of his power of simulation.

Thus, Poe encrypted the femicide story. In doing so, he followed in the footsteps of two of the most successful novelists of his time, Bulwer-Lytton and Dickens, in whose tales the killing of the woman was not achieved by overt physical violence, but by terror. Incidentally, in “Ligeia,” the death of Rowena is quite obviously a nod to Dickens’ tale—she too dwindles from the terror her husband inspired on her, and which would have killed her, the latter suggests, had the dead Ligeia not intervened. This kind of crime, then, was a more acceptable iteration—and, as I said, there is some bitter irony there—of femicide. However, whereas in the “madmen” stories death by terror of the female bride replaces the violent crime that had been overtly depicted in Macnish’s story, in “Ligeia” Poe does something bolder. The death of Rowena, which is reminiscent of Dicken’s tale, culminates in the wake scene, which is inspired in the corresponding scene in Macnish’s tale, and through which Poe intimates that Ligeia had, like Mary Elliston, died at the hands of her lover. Thus, while the tale ostensibly presents a transfigured, less gruesome depiction of the shocking crime of femicide, along the lines of what his immediate predecessors had done, and allowed readers to suppose the narrator had been spared the guilt of actually killing his second wife by the timely intervention of his dead first wife, Poe cleverly diverted their attention from another crime, the cold-blooded femicide of Ligeia herself, and from the clues that showed beyond any reasonable doubt that she had died at the narrator’s hands, and that he had been haunted by the memory of that deed ever since.

#### 4 - “Mortar, Sand, and Hair:” “The Black Cat” as femicide story

Later, in the “Black Cat,” Poe took a different approach to the femicide story. There, the fact that the wife is slaughtered by her husband is not concealed from the reader. On the contrary, the drama develops, without any disguise, before our very eyes. But is it femicide? In the sense of sexist murder of a woman, it would appear not, for the narrator blames it all on his pet, a nasty revenant black cat named Pluto, just as the narrator of “Ligeia” had blamed the death of Rowena, despite the obvious fact that he was terrorising her to death, on the revenant Ligeia.

Therefore, in a sense, “The Black Cat” can be seen as a sort of retelling of the same basic story, where the first dark-haired wife is substituted by a black-haired cat. The storyline is, in a sense, more obvious here than in the previous tale, in that the narrator avows that he had killed both cat and wife, but this makes the tale, in another sense, even more mysterious. In “Ligeia” the mystery itself is more obvious, that is, we immediately recognise the narrator is not telling us the whole story, and therefore must attempt to fill the conspicuous holes he left. In “The Black Cat,” on the other hand, although it is equally clear that the narrator is hiding something from the reader, it is very hard to understand what it is that he means to conceal. Not that the apparent “thesis” makes more sense here, but the story seems, at first sight, complete, which was not the case in “Ligeia.”

The key to this mystery is, as in all femicide stories, the implied moral of the tale. In “Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections Between Poe’s Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision,” Joseph J. Moldenhauer noticed that Poe’s tales usually have a “‘didactic’ level” of meaning, that is, that they are ostensibly oriented towards the inculcation of a simple moral maxim; but also that this moral was usually too simplistic to be convincing, and, in some cases, even blatantly inappropriate: “the outcome of each tale invites, from the childish mind, a pat moral summary. Thus, ‘The Black Cat’ can be construed to mean something like *Be kind to dumb animals—or else!*” (832). In the context, of course, this moral is shocking, in that it devalues the killing of

the wife. Yet, the tale unquestionably is structured so as to inculcate the moral that one should not kill *dumb animals*. The obvious implication, of course, is that it may sometimes be acceptable to kill women—but never cats. The tendency of the narrator’s rhetoric, therefore, closely matches that of *Confessions* and Poe’s own “Ligeia.” The parallel with the latter tale is reinforced by the narrator’s apparently meaningless suggestion that black cats were *not* dumb animals, but “witches in disguise” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 850).

Yet, most critics have attempted to justify the narrator’s repulsive moral “thesis,” in the belief that they were justifying Poe himself. The tale has generally been regarded as dealing with such deep motivations of the human behavior as escape both consciousness and rational analysis. Thus, in a sense, the conventional critical approach to the tale accepts the rationalisations that allow the narrator to disavow guilt for the crime for which he was convicted—the murder of his wife. For, indeed, he clearly indicates that he has already been convicted: “to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 849). He did kill his wife, but, according to these critics, he did not mean to. In other words, his motive for doing so, or, as he implies, his lack thereof, has never been questioned. Most critics, of course, will tell you the same thing of “Ligeia.” Yet, it seems to me that in both cases the narrator’s supernatural yarn is an excuse through which one can very easily see—indeed, one can see through his slippery rationalisations even more easily than the cops could see through the wall which concealed the wife’s body. William Gargano’s “‘The Black Cat:’ Perverseness Reconsidered” and Susan Amper’s “Untold Story: The Lying Narrator in ‘The Black Cat,’” which I will quote throughout this section, are notable exceptions to the prevailing critical practice.

Let me attempt to show what I mean. According to the narrator, he had first tortured Pluto the black cat, “deliberately cut[ting] one of its eyes from the socket,” and then hanged him, for no reason, just because he felt like it (Poe, “The Black Cat” 851). This is the first act he chalks up to “perverseness,” the term he uses to designate a supposed basic human tendency for self-destruction

and humiliation. After the death of his unfortunate, blameless pet, the narrator recounts how he encountered another cat that was almost the perfect resemblance of the first:

One night as I sat, half stupified in a den of more than infamy, my attention was suddenly drawn to some black object, reposing upon the head of one of the immense hogsheads of Gin, or Rum, which constituted the chief furniture of the apartment. I had been looking steadily at the top of this hogshead for some minutes, and what now caused me surprise was the fact that I had not sooner perceived the object thereupon. (854)

This object, then, was a near duplicate of the sacrificed Pluto. It was black and even missed one eye. The only difference was a “large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 854). To the best of my knowledge, the way in which this episode foreshadows the climax of the tale has been completely ignored in Poe scholarship. The second Pluto was found *on top of a hogshead*; when the police later demolishes the wall on which the narrator had concealed the body of his wife, the cat had supposedly appeared *on top of her head*. Thus, the head of the wife is identified, through a pun, with the head of a pig. This correspondence suggests the narrator’s animosity toward his wife—an animosity the narrator seems to rationalise away through the story of the cat—preceded the appearance of the supposedly demoniacal cat. Thus, the circumstances of the appearance of the second cat suggest, as it were through metonymy, that, contrary to his claims, he had had a motive for murder.

This pattern of superimposition of the cat on the wife is then reiterated throughout the tale, in which the two are systematically confused. This confusion affects the narrator’s statements in truly disturbing ways, for, at times, we simply cannot be sure whether he is thinking about the cat or about his wife:

With my aversion for this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the

reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with his loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long and sharp claws in my dress, clamber, in this manner, to my breast. (Poe, “The Black Cat” 855)

The narrator’s repulse, even horror for an animal that exhibits the typical behavior of the common house cat is hard to understand—it seems misplaced. That is, until we realise that the cat represents the wife. It responded to his violent behavior with kindness; so did his wife: “my uncomplaining wife, alas! was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 856). The confusion the tale exploits, between wife and pet, is, of course, inherent to the conventional patriarchal representation of woman as a being naturally submissive to man, and whose only concern is to please him. Moreover, the cat was trying to get on the narrator’s “breast;” thus, metonymy once again corrodes the narrator’s rhetoric, for the cat was, figuratively speaking, taking the place that belonged to the “wife of my bosom” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 858). Or perhaps the narrator was already starting to confuse wife and cat even at this early stage.

As the tale approaches its climax, the cat does indeed start to appear consistently where one would expect the wife—that is, on his bosom. “And now,” says the narrator,

was I indeed wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere Humanity. And *a brute beast—(…) a brute beast* to work out for *me*—for me a man, fashioned in the image of the High God—so much of insufferable wo! Alas! neither by day or by night knew I the blessing of Rest any more! During the former, the creature left me no moment alone; and, in the latter, I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of *the thing* upon my face, and its vast weight – an incarnate Night-Mare that I had no power to shake off—incumbent eternally upon *my heart*!

(Poe, “The Black Cat” 855-856)

But which “creature” does he mean: the wife or the cat? The question is a legitimate one. The cat is “eternally upon” his heart. This choice of words, in itself, evokes the idea of marriage, conceived as an indissoluble tie. The marriage vow tied him “eternally” to his wife—to whom the husband significantly refers as the “wife of my bosom.” Perhaps she, not the cat, was manifesting her “fondness” for him in the dark? As Susan Amper remarks, the fact that the narrator’s reactions are “misplaced” is evidence of “the substitution of cat for wife and wife for cat, first described by Daniel Hoffman and now widely accepted. There is no doubt that the narrator projects his feelings for his wife onto his cat, but the substitution is even more complete than Hoffman suggests” (“Untold Story” 479). Evidently, when we replace the wife with the cat, the idea of sexual solicitation immediately springs to mind. In this light, the previous statement becomes a classic statement of gamophobia: marriage had deprived the husband of his “rest.” Underlying this feeling, of course, is the anxiety of sexual performance that Poe had manifested much more clearly in one of his earlier tales, “Loss of Breath” (a reading of which may be found in the third chapter).

The weight of the “cat,” incidentally, plays a role similar to that of the height and color of hair of the female apparitions in “Ligeia,” and also, as we will see in the next section, “Berenice.” Such details invariably disturb the narrator’s identification of the intruder. In “The Black Cat,” then, through obscure symbolism and sibylline statement, the narrator suggests, without realising it, the true identity of the repulsive—to him—being with whom he was constrained eternally to share his bed. Evidently, the incubus which tormented him was not, as he implausibly asserts, a very heavy cat, but his wife—for she undoubtedly weighed much more than a cat. This hypothesis, indeed, fits the facts much better than his own which is, by his own admission, incredible.

It should be noticed that he himself challenges the reader to find rational explanations for the facts he reports. This challenge, however, has generally been regarded as a rhetorical device meant to highlight the radical unintelligibility of his experience: “Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantom to the commonplace—some intellect more calm, more

logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 850). The viability of the natural explanation to which he here alludes, and which he induces the reader to overlook, of course, overthrows his rhetoric.

Moreover, the context of the sentence describing his restless nights is itself ambiguous. The narrator is apparently blaming the cat for his “wo,” but an equally plausible reading would be that his indignation was directed at the wife, who he claims had first pointed out that the “splotch” of white hair in the cat’s “breast” resembled a gallows. He evidently saw this as a sign of his own doom—which would only make sense, of course, if he was already contemplating the murder of his wife, as no one is hanged for killing a cat. Indeed, his “sentiments, as Gargano points out, constitute ‘outrageous excess’ if applied merely to the killing of a cat. As a reaction to the murder of one’s wife, they seem far more appropriate. By contrast, the narrator’s reaction at the time of the incident on the stairs,” the killing of the wife with an axe blow, “seems wholly inadequate to the enormity of the deed” (Amper, “Untold Story” 479).

The term “brute” also apparently points towards Pluto, but that too is ambiguous in the context, for, as we have seen, the narrator had previously evoked the Biblical myth of creation, contrasting “*brute beast*” with “man, fashioned in the image of the High God” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 856). He thereby brings into relief an inherent ambiguity in the myth, which appears in two different versions in the first two chapters of *Genesis*. According to the second of these versions, God first created man, and then fashioned woman out of one of his ribs. Thus, as Mary Wollstonecraft remarked (I will discuss her critique of the myth in the third chapter), woman was represented as the result of a secondary act of creation. Not only was she *not* formed in the image of God, her creation involved splitting the originally created man. Through the extraction of the rib, the original man was made incomplete. Thus, as Wollstonecraft also remarked, women were

effectively granted an ambiguous status, half-way between humanity and brute creation. And the narrator's confusion of wife and cat itself reiterates the association.

Thus, the pattern of allusion in "The Black Cat," which corresponds perfectly to what Poe called an "undercurrent of suggestion," is a clear indication that the cat did not make the narrator do it; that he killed his wife because he hated women, and thought that they ranked lower in the scale of creation than pets—perhaps, they were on a level with hogs, his tale slyly suggests (Poe, Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1842] 571). Only this explains that a man who feels heart-rending remorse for killing his cat should remain perfectly calm after driving an axe through his wife's skull.

As already stated, the deed itself, the killing of the wife, is not concealed. But the motives of the narrator are masked by his supernatural hypothesis. His very "thesis," however, indicates that the true motive for killing his wife was a sort of superstition he shared with the protagonist of Macnish's *Confessions*. This superstition, then, shows to the reader that he was not merely a man who *happened* to kill a woman, but a femicide by character.

He presents himself, however, as a loving husband, driven to frenzy by a revenant cat he had killed for no reason. Indeed, in his own estimation, he was guilty only of killing the cat. But this simply does not add up, for he evidently did not kill the cat for *no reason*, but through an irresistible urge to expose his guilt for the murder of his wife, which he was apparently already mediating. As previously stated, the narrator had hanged his black cat, Pluto, from a branch of a tree in the garden of his house. This happened in the morning. The following night, he "was aroused from sleep by the cry of fire." "It was," he reports, "with great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself, made our escape from the conflagration" (Poe, "The Black Cat" 852).

The narrator significantly omits any reference to his activities between the hanging of the cat, and the middle of the following night, when he claims to have been aroused by the neighbors' cries of fire. He has, therefore, no alibi. The fire, he candidly avows, almost killed his wife—this was perhaps what he intended. Considering how he felt about the "cat," indeed, it is not



unreasonable to suppose he had himself started the fire in a first unsuccessful attempt at his wife's life. Incidentally, his declaration that he had, even before the fire, "offered her personal violence" is consistent with this hypothesis (Poe, "The Black Cat" 851). In fact, if we subject his statements to the sort of inquiry a judge would be obliged to conduct, that is, dismissing supernatural intervention, we are forced to conclude that the circumstantial evidence clearly points in that direction. And then, of course, his own conviction that the sacrifice of the cat foreshadowed his own hanging, in itself, indicates that he was already meditating an offense actually punishable with death, the murder of the wife, not the hanging of the cat.

But this is where things really start to get complicated. The house burned to the ground, he tells us, with the exception of the wall "against which had rested the head of my bed," where, "as if graven in *bas relief* upon the white surface," the "figure of a gigantic *cat*" had meanwhile appeared. The narrator comes up with an utterly preposterous explanation for this. He supposes one of the crowd that gathered around his house while the fire was raging had thrown the body of the hanging cat through "an open window, into my chamber," adding that: "This had probably been done with the view of arousing me from sleep." It is hard to admit that a less cumbersome projective, and one more suitable for this purpose could not be procured. Piling improbability upon improbability, the narrator comes up with an even more improbable pseudo-scientific hypothesis to explain how the cat turned into a *bas-relief*: the "falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty [the cat] into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster; the lime of which, with the flames, and the *ammonia* from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it" (Poe, "The Black Cat" 853).

This is the second time the narrator mentions that the wall had been plastered. Because of this, he conjectures, it "resisted the action of the fire." But he offers no explanation for the fact. Why had the wall been plastered in the first place, and, more importantly, by whom? The answers to these questions are conspicuously absent from his narrative, but may nonetheless be deduced from a

few apparently unconnected details which also suggest a much more probable explanation for the impression of the cat than the one the narrator provides. The idea that the remains of the cat compressed against the wall by the unlikely haphazard process he describes could somehow spontaneously arrange themselves into a neat semblance of a cat, the “accuracy” of which is said to be “truly marvelous,” complete with “a rope around the animal’s neck” is not credible—in fact, it could not be more incredible (Poe, “The Black Cat” 853).

Such “compression” would no doubt result, rather, in a bloody, confused mess of cat’s entrails. The absence of the *insides* of the cat from the picture is the single most unlikely aspect of the narrator’s hypothesis. If the cat had been squashed, as he tells us, how could they have vanished so completely? And then, the figure on the wall was not life-size, but gigantic, which pushes the already overwhelming unlikelihood of the narrator’s proposition into the realm of the ludicrous.

In *The Sign of the Four*, Sherlock Holmes famously states a basic “precept” of his method: “How often have I said to you [Watson] that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth?” (Conan Doyle 638). This, of course, is clearly derived from declarations made by Dupin in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” After satisfying himself, and the unnamed narrator, that all other means of escape were impracticable, the French detective concluded that the “murderer” escaped through one of the windows of the room in which the victims had been found. This, he granted, *seemed* impossible. However, he reasons that, being “brought to this conclusion in so unequivocal a manner as we are, it is not our part, as reasoners, to reject it on account of apparent impossibilities. It is only left for us to prove that these apparent ‘impossibilities’ are, in reality, not such.” He claims that this certainty oriented his investigation, which ultimately led him to the discovery of the famous broken nail: “My own examination was somewhat more particular [than the police’s] (...) because here it was, I knew, that all apparent impossibilities *must* be proved to be not such in reality” (Poe, “Murders” 551, 552).

Through the mouth of the narrator of the tale himself, Poe challenges the reader of “The Black Cat” to play the detective unto its mysteries—that is, to find a natural explanation for his story. Is it not reasonable, then, to assume that the same principle should be applied to this investigation that Dupin applies to similarly mysterious circumstances and which, in the case of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” had led others to admit supernatural intervention? This is the view maintained by Susan Amper, who, in her article on the tale, “Untold Story,” has taken up the narrator’s explicit challenge to the reader:

When understood as part fact and part misrepresentation designed to minimize the narrator’s guilt, the story gains an important virtue it otherwise lacks: intelligibility. Critics, indeed, have yet to put forth any reasonable interpretation of the actual events of the story. (...) Until now, the foremost analyses of the stories have come from those, including Marie Bonaparte, Daniel Hoffman, and William Crisman, who have abandoned any attempt to address the literal meaning of events, dealing with them exclusively as psychological phenomena. (“Untold Story” 475-76)

Amper here also makes another important point. If the events in the tale are susceptible of literal interpretation, the psychological or allegorical interpretation, suggested by the narrator, is overthrown.

If we take the tale as a mystery, then, we must reject impossibilities whenever rational explanations are viable. Poe could not possibly have come up with a least probable explanation for the portrait of the cat on the wall. The improbability is such that we may safely regard it, in practice, as an impossibility—and this is precisely what I believe Poe intended to intimate to the analytical reader. The narrator’s hypothesis is as absolute an impossibility as may be conceived; therefore, it must be excluded. And then, even if we were to grant the narrator’s hypothesis, for which he admits there was no precedent, it still would not explain why the wall was plastered. There is, of course, a perfectly plausible alternative explanation for all this—and this must be the solution to the mystery.

Evidently, the portrait of the cat must be human-made. Since he cannot account for his movements between the hanging of the cat and the fire, one can reasonably suspect that the narrator himself had been responsible for both the plastering and the portrait of the cat.

Later, after he killed his wife, he shows the reader that he possessed the requisite know-how. “Having procured mortar, sand, and hair, with every possible precaution, I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over the new brick-work.” Hair is, of course, the key ingredient. Hair, commonly of horses, but sometimes also of goats, or oxen, was employed for the purpose of providing structural reinforcement to plaster. On that occasion, the worker complacently surveyed his work, and said to himself: “‘Here at least, then, my labor has not been in vain’” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 858). This sentence suggests, of course, that this had not been the first time he had done this kind of work.

His commentary on his work on the cellar wall clearly alludes, I think, to his previous work on the wall of the bedroom in his previous home. That is, I think it effectively demonstrates that he had been responsible for the plastering on that occasion too. In retrospect, this provides a plausible natural explanation for how the cat—or the part of the cat that used to be its surface—got mixed “into the substance” of the plaster—for, as we have seen, the narrator did not see a squashed cat, but a portrait of one. Indeed, his specious theory appears to me a desperate attempt to avoid recognising the obvious: that the only way the cat could have been compressed “into the substance” of the plaster was if the body, or more precisely its hair—for there was apparently no sign of the entrails —, had somehow got mixed into the plaster when it was being prepared.

But, as is so often the case with Poe’s fiction, it is easy to get sidetracked. Our attention is even now being diverted from the crucial facts of the matter. When he saw the figure of the cat, the narrator *knew*, without a doubt, that the cat was inside the house, although he could not credibly account for this conviction—this is the crucial fact. Not only that, he seems to have been absolutely certain that the cat had been mixed into the substance of the plaster—for, the very absurdity of his

explanation shows us that he did not deduce—could not have deduced—this singular, unprecedented fact. Therefore, one must conclude that it was the other way around: his theory was created to accommodate his preestablished belief that the hair of the cat was mixed into the plaster.

I once again appeal to Dupin's principle of detection. The portrait of the black cat on the wall was made out of the body of the cat. This means, of course, that the hair of the cat was visible on the wall—otherwise, it would not be a portrait of a cat, but merely a squashed cat. And the hair could not possibly have got into the plaster *spontaneously* after the plaster had been spread, it must have been mixed into the plaster when this was being prepared. If this was so, as it must have been unless a miracle is admitted, the neighbours could not possibly have thrown the cat at him, as he claims, for the very simple reason that the cat was already inside the house. The narrator, of course, never doubted that the cat was *inside*, he just could not figure out how some of it was visible on the wall.

This brings us back to the other crucial question: why was the wall in his bedroom, and only that wall, replastered? In my opinion, this is the decisive question. This, I admit, is also the question I have more difficulty in answering. The narrator's mysterious remark when he finished the wall in the cellar, however, suggest a parallelism between his two experiments in interior renovation. I suspect the wall of the bedroom had been plastered for exactly the same reason for which the wall of the cellar would later be plastered. The narrator evidently felt that the hanged cat represented his guilt for the murder of his wife. He would therefore naturally be anxious to suppress the evidence of the “perverse” act of self-incrimination that was but too clear an intimation of the crime he meditated. For, as I have before stated, I am convinced that he intended his wife to be killed on the fire that destroyed his house. If his plan should succeed, the cat might have been the only loose end in an otherwise perfect crime.

This is what I think may have happened. The same expedient presented to him at that time that he would later employ to conceal his wife's body. He took the wall apart, placed the body of his

victim inside, and carefully replaced the bricks. Finally, he mixed the cat's hair with mortar and sand to create a plaster that he thought could not be distinguished from the original. This would satisfactorily explain many hitherto unexplained circumstances, namely, how the impression of the cat could have been achieved, and also the strange disappearance of the cat's insides.

The parallelism between the two instances of "plastering" in the tale itself suggests that it served the same purpose on both cases, that is, covering up the narrator's work on the wall. There are, of course, other reasons for taking down walls, but the fact that the narrator omits any explanation, indicates that this was something he wanted to conceal from the reader. The only reason I can conceive for all this, is that he had indeed walled Pluto in. When he plasters the wall of the cellar, as we have seen, the narrator remarks that he had "prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old" (Poe, "The Black Cat" 857). In the case of the bedroom wall, of course, this had obviously not been the case. An impression of the cat was visible on the surface of the wall—according to him, the very substance of the cat had been mixed *into* the plaster. Since he evidently is not telling all he knows about that first wall, I suspect the narrator knew he had hidden the cat *inside*, but really did not understand how the portrait of the cat had appeared on the *surface* of the wall *inside* which he had hidden it. That is, he never realised he had himself "perversely," as he puts it, advertised the tomb by leaving some of his victim's body in the plaster. Thus, he divulged the very secret he had worked so hard to conceal, and which he felt resulted from a to him incomprehensible urge to denounce himself, the hanging of the cat, by another act of self-incrimination. Indeed, both are the result of that apparently unconscious compulsion to incriminate himself that he thought was unexplainable. On that occasion, however, his slip was of no consequence. His wife survived the fire; therefore, he had committed no crime.

This hypothesis would also explain the mysterious words he pronounces after finishing his work on the second wall. "Here, at least," he tells us, "my work has not been in vain" (Poe, "The Black Cat" 857). This can be construed as an allusion to a previous unsuccessful attempt to hide a

body inside a wall. The second time around, however, he *felt* certain that he had succeeded in concealing the body, as he could discern no sign of the wife on the surface of the cellar wall. These words, incidentally, appear to result themselves from his “perverseness.”

We must now pause to consider his theory of “perverseness” which these revelations force us to reassess. According to this theory, the narrator killed the black cat Pluto for no reason at all, through a supposedly universal “longing of the soul to *vex itself*” (Poe “The Black Cat” 852). This theory, then, allows him to ignore the true nature of his repeated acts of self-incrimination. Indeed, he seems to have been under a much stronger compulsion to “vex” himself than most other people. The reason for this, is obvious: guilt. Guilt for a crime he intended to commit, and for which he felt he should be sentenced to death. This was evidently a crime he had been meditating for a long time. Indeed, long before he actually killed his wife, the narrator had been acted upon by this strange compulsion to manifest his guilt. Evidently, this is what had prompted him to *hang* the cat in the first place—for he immediately saw the hung cat as a foreshadowing of *his* own hanging. However, he did not perceive that guilt was the hidden spring of all his apparently unmotivated slips. And the theory of “perverseness” allowed him to continue to ignore this fact.

William Gargano has pointed out, against the bulk of criticism of Poe’s work, both before and after the publication of his article on “The Black Cat,” that: “If any perverseness exists in the story, it is the protagonist’s perverseness in being able to dismiss a transparently moral adventure as a mere consequence of inexplicable events” (“‘The Black Cat’” 178). Indeed, Gargano remarks that the narrator’s “frenetic deeds and rationalizations have all the appearance of a blind attempt to escape from ineluctable moral consequences whose authority he unconsciously admits by contemptuous derogations of them” (172). Gargano also terms such “rationalisations” “specious intellectual dodges” (178). This constituted an explicit rejection of the school of thought that has regarded “perverseness” as the central structuring principle of Poe’s work and psyche. Thus read, Poe became emblematic of Leslie A. Fiedler’s influential conceptualisation of the American Gothic:

“Our novel of terror is well on the way to becoming a Calvinist exposé of natural human corruption rather than an enlightened attack on a debased ruling class or entrenched superstition. The European Gothic identified blackness with the super-ego and was therefore revolutionary in its implications; the American gothic (...) identified evil with the id and was therefore conservative at its deepest level of implication, whatever the intent of its authors” (*Love and Death* 160-61). This idea of the Gothic is, indeed, easily translatable into the terms of the theory of “perverseness.” Gargano, however, successfully demonstrates that Poe and his narrator must not be identified.

Still, Gargano’s reading of “The Black Cat” is not as significant a departure from previous readings of the tale as it might seem at first, inasmuch as he too dilutes the guilt of the murder of the wife by construing it as a particular form of the narrator’s compulsion to “sin” against his own nature: “Having in a furtive manner mutilated himself and thus cut himself off from the resources and nourishment of his moral nature, he must more publicly proclaim his own evil. (...) The hanging of the cat is the clandestine equivalent to the humanly revolting murder of his wife; they are the same deed, in the latter case taking a form that outrages society and must be punished by it” (“‘The Black Cat’” 176-77).

Moreover, according to Gargano, the tale cannot be reduced to literal sense, but must be read symbolically. This notion determines his reading of the ending of the tale: “the ‘cat’ is concealed in the depths of a nature still perversely divided and he [the narrator] is, in spite of his proclamations to the contrary, highly disturbed” (“‘The Black Cat’” 177). Likewise, the wall spared by the fire “with the ‘portraiture’ of Pluto on it (...) clearly signifies,” for Gargano, “that what survives of the narrator will be haunted by his inerradicable sin against his own nature” (175-76). Again, the murder of the wife is not granted the status of an autonomous crime and, consequently, continues to be seen as a function of a deep psychological urge to “vex” oneself rather than a deliberate act of the will. On the contrary, I believe Poe’s tale implies the idea of moral responsibility, and, consequently, a moral outlook.



The passage in which the narrator reports that, after having hung the cat and presumably set his own house on fire, he experienced a “sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse,” appears to me crucial to understand his blindness (Poe, “The Black Cat” 853). The reader assumes this feeling is relative to the killing of the cat, but this makes no sense. A few lines before he admitted he felt “the bitterest remorse” when he hung the cat from the tree (852). Therefore, this other feeling, which *was not* remorse, it may be surmised, had reference to some other misdeed. I can only think of one. He was not sorry for having tried to kill his wife. Therefore, he persevered, and eventually did what he evidently had intended to do all along. Evidently, this “sentiment” to which the narrator of the tale obscurely alludes, and which was “not remorse,” is the same mentioned in the following passage of Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), which describes the state of mind of Arbaces, the villain of the novel, after he kidnapped Ione: “he felt that uneasiness and apprehension which attend upon the chance of detection even when the criminal is insensible to the *voice* of conscience—that vague terror of the consequence of the crime, which is often mistaken for remorse at the crime itself” (2: 86-7).

As I have already stated, it may be surmised that the hair of the first victim—the cat—had been mixed into the plaster, not after it was spread, as he unconvincingly claims, but while it was being prepared. My guess is that the hair of the second “victim” of his “cruelty” had, like the hair of the first, been mixed “into the substance” of the plaster, and therefore, that some trace of her was left on the surface of the wall. This solution, aside from satisfactorily accounting for most of the loose ends left by the narrator, also makes sense artistically. As we have seen, Poe thought that the events in a tale should follow necessarily from each other, in an unbroken chain of necessity, and that no point should be left out. According to my hypothesis, the killing of the cat, the impression on the wall, and the narrator’s self-incriminating behavior before the police are all referred to the same cause, the narrator’s unexplainable drive to denounce himself.

However, I must admit I am not completely satisfied with this explanation. It is very hard to make sense of this tale. The narrator seems to be half-deluded, and half-dishonest, and this makes it very hard to conjecture valid motives for his actions. I conjectured that he meant to conceal from the reader that he had walled the first cat in. But why would he want to do this? He is already condemned; therefore, one would think he might as well come clean. On the other hand, he does admit he drove an axe through his wife's head, and this makes all his other "crimes" pale in comparison. Perhaps that is the point—he may not have realised that nothing could be worse than the things he openly confesses. One thing, however, is clear: he does not come clean. Perhaps he intended to guarantee an honourable reputation after he was dead, by blaming it all on the cat. I must confess, however, I cannot quite figure him out.

Susan Amper, whose interpretation of the tale builds on the same principles that oriented mine, has nonetheless arrived at a very different solution. She argued that "just as his subconscious drives him against his will to reveal the hiding place [of the corpse], so does it cause him to plant in his story telltale clues that disclose his guilty secret" ("Untold Story" 475). Although I agree in principle with this assessment, the particular explanation she provides for the mystery does not seem completely convincing to me. Particularly, Amper's explanation leaves out the appearance of the cat on the wall of the bedroom, and, more decisively fails to provide an explanation as to why it was plastered. According to her, the crucial clue to the mystery is *inside* the wall:

The climax of the story's action, and the height of the murderer's guilt-induced folly, occur when, just as the police are about to leave, he raps the wall within which his wife's body is entombed. In the same way, readers are but three sentences from finishing the story, largely accepting of the narrator's version of events, when he reveals gratuitously the greatly decayed state of the corpse, providing the crucial evidence that exposes his crime" (Amper, "Masters of Deceit" 38).

Amper sustains the view that the fact of the body being “greatly decayed,” mentioned by the narrator, is inconsistent with the narrator’s chronology. The murder had, according to him, been committed four days earlier. Amper argues the advanced state of decay he mentions could not have been produced in so short a lapse. Therefore, she concludes, the narrator had killed his wife much earlier, on the night that his house was consumed by fire, taking the corpse with him to his new residence. While, as I have stated, I agree with the basic assumptions of Amper’s reading, namely that the reader is supposed to find the solution to the mysteries the narrator was powerless to unravel, I find this particular solution unsatisfactory. Dupin’s own exposition of the philosophy of decomposition of corpses, in Poe’s later tale “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” undermines her argument: “we can assign no period, with any thing like accuracy, at which the corpse shall rise through decomposition. Under certain circumstances this result would be brought about within the hour; under others, it might not take place at all” (742). This indicates, at least, that Poe was convinced that such definite conclusions as Amper draws solely from the progress of decomposition on the corpse were unwarranted—and Poe’s understanding of the subject, I think, would have to take precedence over whatever notions we might ourselves entertain. In any case, the term “greatly decayed” is rather vague, and therefore at best provides a fragile support for Amper’s argument. The narrator may merely be saying that four days after death the corpse was not nice to look at, which, especially considering the massive damage the head had sustained, appears perfectly plausible.

On the other hand, there is considerable evidence that the wife was still alive when the narrator moved to his new home. The more obvious evidence is, of course, the narrator’s testimony to that effect. The systematic confusion between cat and wife in the second part of the tale provides another kind of evidence that the wife was alive that I also find very hard to dismiss. Still, Amper’s explanation makes sense in other respects. The theory that allows the narrator to disavow guilt, perhaps to clean his name, is that the revenant cat made him do it. Therefore, it would make sense for him to lie about the time of death. If he had killed his wife before the cat returned from the dead,

this would mean that the crime had been premeditated. Still, I think the slippery rationalizations through which he pins the rap on the cat are, in and of themselves, ludicrous. And then, Amper's affirmation that the state of decay of the body "exposes his crime" is not entirely accurate. From the point of view of the reader, the crime had already been revealed—Amper's hypothesis merely ascribes it to an earlier period. From a narrative standpoint, on the other hand, the discovery of the body, regardless of its state of composition, is the evidence that confirmed the police's suspicions.

In any case, to me, the crucial fact of the tale is the narrator's compulsion to incriminate himself, which provides possible explanations for almost all those odd details the narrator challenges his reader to explain, namely the two salient details his narrative leaves unexplained: the recently plastered wall in the narrator's bedroom, and his remark about his work on the cellar. The solution to the mystery must, I think, provide satisfactory explanations for all these facts, and this is what I have attempted to achieve.

My thesis, then, is that the *corpus delicti* was, quite literally, on the surface of the structure the narrator erected to cover it up. Whether he had left a visible "impression" of his victim on the plaster, as he clearly had done with the cat, cannot be ascertained—but neither can this hypothesis be ruled out, given the manifest parallelism between the two crucial episodes in the tale. His explanation for the police's change of mind is, incidentally, also preposterous: he contends a unearthly scream from within the wall was what ultimately betrayed him—indeed, he appears to believe that this scream, and not his tapping, was what tipped the police off. Thus, the cat had, according to him, been responsible both for the crime and for revealing it; it was "the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman" (Poe, "The Black Cat" 859). But then, as usual, he does not exactly say that the cat "screamed:"

I was answered by a voice from within the tomb!—by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and

continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman—a howl—a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation. (858-59).

Is this really the cat we are talking about? One wonders. In any case, this is a positively unearthly, hence utterly implausible “scream,” that a detective would have to regard as an impossibility. A more likely hypothesis is that the narrator’s tapping itself betrayed him. I believe, however, that they had never been fooled. All things considered, the police may even have noticed something different about the part of the wall to which the narrator felt an irresistible urge to draw their attention—though his behavior, in itself, would have suggested that was a good place to begin the search.

However, the narrator’s claim that the plaster *on that* wall “could not be distinguished from the *old*” (emphasis mine) is certainly suspicious. The parallelism with the other episode in the tale involving plaster actually makes the statement ambiguous, in a way that strengthens my conjecture. Perhaps the plaster was not distinguishable from the plaster on the wall of his bedroom, which would mean that some sign of the victim within might be perceivable without.

In any case, what seems to me beyond dispute is that the narrator had used the hair of both his victims as an ingredient for the plaster. And his final act of self-incrimination suggests that he was anxious to bring that fact to the attention of the police, lest its significance be lost on them as it had been lost on those who saw the figure of the cat on the only wall the fire that had consumed his previous domicile left standing. In light of this hypothesis, his remark about his plastering not being “in vain” becomes an instance of tragic irony. By this I mean that the remark foreshadows his downfall in a way of which he was clearly unaware at the time. He meant to say he had successfully concealed the tomb of his victim *this time*. The other time around, the tell-tale “impression” of the cat having appeared on the wall, he had not succeeded in this. This is what he means to say, but he

cannot acknowledge the obvious fact that he felt an urge to expose himself to detection, and this fact suggests an alternative, unintended meaning for his remark. Apparently, no one had realised the significance of the portrait of the cat, and therefore the narrator was not, as he anticipated and intimately desired, apprehended. The plastering on the wall of the cellar, on the other hand, did not prevent the police from detecting him—on the contrary, this time he was detected. If we consider its intended meaning, then, this outcome proves him wrong: his careful work of concealment had indeed been “in vain.” However, since the secret desire of being detected was the hidden spring of his behaviour, it is really the other way around. The first time, his work had been “in vain” because no one had realised what the cat really meant; the second time, he had finally succeeded in bring about his own downfall.

Moreover, in my reading, the plastering becomes a perfect allegory of the writing of the tale itself, which darkly intimates the guilt which it ostensibly denies, through clues that are hidden in plain sight all over its surface. To my mind, this provides, as it were, the aesthetical confirmation for the foregoing argument. The final lines of the tale reiterate the suggestion that Pluto had indeed also been walled up. The narrator reports that, to his surprise, the cat had been entombed along his wife: “I had walled the monster up within the tomb!” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 859). That he had done this not once, but twice, appears to me the inescapable conclusion. In fact, the cat might not have been there at all. Its appearance is, indeed, one of the wonders of the tale, for the cat had disappeared, he claims, after he killed his wife. In mentioning the cat on his wife’s head, he does not refer the only difference between Pluto the first and Pluto the second: the splotch of white hair. Thus, one cannot be sure which cat he saw, or thinks he saw. Therefore, he may have imagined the *first cat* was there, just as he imagined the scream.

Written almost five years after “Ligeia,” “The Black Cat” documents Poe’s enduring fascination with the duplicitous femicide narrator, which was peculiarly adapted for mysteries. Once all the mysteries are reduced to their true proportions, one ends up with precisely what the narrator

told us in the beginning his story was: “a series of mere household events” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 849). That is, with a trivial, only too plausible, story about a superstitious femicide. However, Poe’s first experiments with this peculiar character predated “Ligeia,” as we shall see in the following section, by several years.

## 5 – “Berenice” and “Morella:” Poe’s Early Femicides

In “Berenice,” first published in March 1835 in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the influence of Macnish’s *Confessions* was already clearly noticeable, especially in the original version of the tale, which contained a wake scene that slyly evokes the one in that tale, while anticipating Poe’s own later reworking of Macnish’s motive in “Ligeia.” In this scene, which Poe would delete from all subsequent editions of the tale, Egæus, the narrator, is alone with the corpse of his cousin and fiancée Berenice, when he is startled by the vision of her teeth. Certain clues indicate, however, that these were not really Berenice’s teeth, and that he was in fact projecting a ghost he had previously seen in his study on his cousin’s corpse.

But, whereas in “Ligeia” the projection of the dark lady on the blonde corpse is evident, in “Berenice” it must be deduced by the reader. Egæus, who was soon to marry his cousin Berenice, was seating quietly in his study when he received an unsettling visit. Although he had not heard anyone come in, he recounts that on “uplifting my eyes, Berenice stood before me” (Poe, 214).<sup>39</sup> But why would he say it was Berenice? The “person” of the visitor was different, in every way, from that of his cousin: its “emaciation was excessive, and not one vestige of the former being lurked in any single line of the contour” (215 emphasis mine).<sup>40</sup> In short, the apparition looked *nothing* like Berenice. And he does mean nothing: “the once golden hair” was “now black as the raven’s wing” (215n); not even the height was right: “Perhaps she had grown taller since her malady” (214n).<sup>41</sup> Poe recycled the idea of the complete assimilation of two entirely different women, one of whom is a phantom from the past, in “Ligeia,” and, indeed, transferred most of the last quoted sentence to that tale (it was quite literally a transference, for Poe omitted it from all

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39 The phrase appears in this form in the original publication in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, as well as the first book edition in *Tales* (1840) (Mabbott’s texts A through C). In later editions of the tale, Poe added the words “I saw that” after the comma.

40 This sentence appears in all editions of the tale overseen by Poe.

41 The text quoted in this sentence comes from the original version of the tale (Mabbott’s text A).



subsequent editions of “Berenice”).<sup>42</sup> In 1845, presumably to avoid a too close resemblance between the two tales, Poe inverted the “change” in “Berenice.” The phantom in the study room had originally been dark-haired, and the real Berenice blonde; in the revised tale it was the other way around. This change in the color scheme, as I have intimated before, rendered “Berenice”’s resemblance to Macnish’s *Confessions* a little less conspicuous.

The “phantasm” in Egæus’s study, then, is evidently not Berenice, but the ghost of another woman, who, in the original version of the tale, looked just like Mary Elliston. The shorter, more corpulent blonde Berenice, Egæus’s cousin, on the other hand, resembled Eliza, the original femicide’s sister. In both cases, the blonde woman had been the narrator’s sole playmate in infancy. And the personal signs that would have allowed any reasonable person to distinguish the mystery woman from Berenice are the same that distinguish Mary and Eliza, and the same which would later enable the narrator of “Ligeia” to conclude that Rowena had not come back to life. Therefore, all these tales share the same basic story: a male, evidently deranged narrator is haunted by the ghost of a dark lady.<sup>43</sup>

The resemblance, as I have before stated, was clearer in the original version of “Berenice,” where Egæus appears to actually project the ghost which he incorrectly identified as Berenice on her body. This scene apparently occasioned complaints of readers that felt the tale was too gruesome and in bad taste. As a result, in a letter of April 30, 1835 to T. W. White, then editor of *The Southern Literary Magazine*, Poe apologised saying that “[t]he Tale originated in a bet that I could produce nothing effective on a subject so singular, provided I treated it seriously,” avowing that “it approaches the very verge of bad taste,” and promising he would “not sin quite so egregiously again” (*Letters* 84-85). However, in the same letter, Poe actually makes a defense of sensationalism, and of his peculiar approach to fiction, which often involved, as he puts it, treating such repellent subjects “seriously”—that is, with complete earnestness. He also argues that celebrated English

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42 I have already quoted the relevant sentence: “*but had she then grown taller since her malady?*” (Poe, “Ligeia” 330).

43 Indeed, the phantom smile which haunt Egæus prior to his cousin’s burial evidently belongs to his first victim, the mysterious dark lady in the library, not Berenice.

writers were perpetrating similar offenses against “good taste,” singling out, among others, Bulwer-Lytton’s “Manuscript Found in a Madhouse.” It appears to me that with “Berenice” he had intended to test his audience, to find out just how far he would be permitted to go.

Indeed, Poe would never materially change his approach to fiction. He appears to have realised, however, that he would have to be more discreet in the future. This, I gather, is what he meant when he told White he would never again “sin” as “egregiously”—he did continue to challenge the sensibilities of his readers, but not as conspicuously. The only material alteration he made to the text after this episode was the omission of the wake scene, which apparently had particularly shocked his audience. This sacrifice did indeed succeed in preventing further outrage.

Poe’s original wake scene appears to have been a diluted recreation of the corresponding scene in *Confessions*, which was itself a watered-down version of the rape scene in *The Monk*—still, Poe found out that it was still too crude for American consumption. I would argue that this scene later resurfaced, under a more effective disguise, in “Ligeia.” Indeed, Berenice’s room in this expunged passage evidently anticipated Rowena’s gloomy and funereal bridal-chamber: “The room was large, and very dark, and at every step within its gloomy precincts I encountered the paraphernalia of the grave” (Poe, “Berenice” 217n).

As in “Ligeia,” a curtain heightens the “phantasmagoric” ambiance. The bed where the coffin of Berenice had been placed had a canopy of “draperies,” under which Egæus stuck his head: “As I let them fall they descended upon my shoulders and shutting me thus out from the living, enclosed me in the strictest communion with the deceased;” while thus enclosed, Egæus experiences a frightening vision: “The livid lips were wreathed into a species of smile, and, through the enveloping gloom, once again there glared upon me in too palpable reality, the white and glistening, and ghastly teeth of Berenice;” terrified, Egæus runs from “that apartment of triple horror, and mystery, and death” (Poe, “Berenice” 217n).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> I quote this passage from Mabbott’s footnote to the text. Despite his letter to White, Poe let the passage stand in the 1840 collection *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. Only ten years after its original publication did Poe remove the especially gruesome wake scene, when he revised the text for publication in the *Broadway Journal*.

Yet, the reader must not be influenced by the narrator's disorientation. The mystery is plain enough. The room was dark, and it was presumably even darker within the sable canopy. This gloom was, no doubt, the ideal background for the projection of the glaring white "phantasma" of the teeth, which the narrator had *always* before him ever since the apparition of the smiling pseudo-Berenice in his study. In fact, soon after its departure, Egæus admits: "I saw them *now* even more unequivocally than I beheld them *then*. The teeth! — the teeth! — they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and palpably before me" (Poe, "Berenice" 217n emphasis mine). What may not appear obvious at first, now appears evident. What the narrator "sees" within this *camera obscura* is a composite image, in which the "phantasma" that had appeared to him earlier in his library is merged with the female body lying on the bed. And, in proportion as these "teeth" are "unequivocal," the original image of the dark lady gets *more* "equivocal" than it seemed at first.

And the image of the teeth was very equivocal to begin with. Egæus conjectures that the lady in the study was "palpable," not because he touched her, or she anything in the study, but because he heard *a* door bang. He did not actually "see" her depart. He happened to look down after he "saw" her and, when he looked up again, she was gone—the "unequivocally palpable" teeth were all that remained. And these disembodied teeth, floating in midair, were, by his own admission, less unequivocal than the apparition that preceded them. One can only conclude that he imagined the whole thing. In this scenario, his claim that the teeth were "palpably" before him when he peeped under the sable draperies to see the body of Berenice, deserves no credit. After all, he "saw" the teeth "palpably" *everywhere*.

In fact, as he was about to stick his head under the curtains that kept Berenice's coffin from sight, he admits that "the *phantasma* of the teeth (...), with the most vivid and hideous distinctness, (...) floated about amid the changing lights and shadows of the chamber" (Poe, "Berenice" 217n).

There is, therefore, no reason to suppose the teeth are anything other than a “phantasma,” a word the meaning of which the narrator clearly does not fully comprehend.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, Egæus’s conceptual confusion prevents him from seeing the solution which his own words plainly convey. Pondering deeply over the apparition, the remark that the teeth “alone were present to the mental eye” launches him on a train of associations the concluding link of which is the following thought: “of Berenice I (...) seriously believed *que tout ses dents etaient des idées*” (Poe, “Berenice” 216). Yes, the teeth were “ideas” in the “mental,” not objects seen by the physical eye! There is no reason to suppose otherwise—as there is no reason to suppose the ghost was Berenice. Egæus here casually hits on the solution—only to dismiss the only sensible thing he writes as “the idiotic thought that destroyed me” (216). On the contrary, this was the key that would have saved him from making a fool of himself. For it would have been impossible for him to actually have seen Berenice’s actual teeth: firstly, “[t]here been a band around the jaws,” which, “I know not how (...) was broken asunder;” and then, even if the bandage had somehow miraculously came apart, he still would not have been able to see the teeth, for it was, as he repeatedly asserts, too dark for him to be able to see *anything* (217n). The smile he believes he saw in the dark evidently belonged to the mysterious dark lady whose ghost had previously visited him in the library, and who was not—could not possibly had been—Berenice. In other words, this was, in fact, the “phantasma” which he admits followed him everywhere.

In the original version of the tale, Egæus also claims to have no recollection of what went on after he stormed out of Berenice’s room. The next thing he knew, he was back in his study, with only “unintelligible recollections:” “I strived to decypher them, but in vain; while ever and anon, like the spirit of a departed sound, the shrill and piercing shriek of a female voice seemed to be ringing in my ears. I had done a deed—what was it? I asked myself the question aloud, and the whispering echoes of the chamber answered me, ‘*what was it?*’” (Poe, “Berenice” 218). Judging

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<sup>45</sup> Webster’s Dictionary (1828) defined “phantasm” as follows: “That which appears to the mind; the image of an external object; hence, an idea or notion. It usually denotes a vain or airy appearance; something imagined.”

from the dirty spade that was in his room when he “awoke,” and also from his muddy boots, he had exhumed his cousin’s body, pulled all her teeth, put them in a box, which was also found in his study, leaving “a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing—still palpitating—*still alive*” behind (218).

This are indeed mysterious developments. Twice before, however, Egæus recollections proved to be perfectly intelligible—only not to him. Through his mistakes and evident misapprehensions, that is, he mystically intimates to the reader the true story of which he appears to have been himself unaware; the solution to the riddle he was not able to solve. This appears to me to be another case in point. Again, the key to this final riddle is the phantom of the dark lady. When he wakes up in his study, and immediately before he finds the box containing the bloody, *palpable* teeth of Berenice, Egæus is tormented by the recollection of a female voice, which haunts him like “the spirit of a departed sound.” But to whom does this voice belong to: to Berenice or to the mysterious woman who was *not* her? Has he done something to the mystery lady that he should be tormented by her ghost, as he is? More to the point, has he done something to her that he should be haunted by *her teeth*? The narrator has no recollection of having done anything of the kind, but then, his convenient amnesia perfectly accounts for that gap. He also cannot remember having dug Berenice up and pulled her teeth.

Egæus speaks of “mystery and terror, and a tale that should not be told” (Poe, “Berenice” 210-211). Notwithstanding, by telling us about the ghosts that haunt him, he *shows* us the horrible tale he would not *tell*. He saw the ghost in the library. This is a room that brings back memories to the nostalgic Egæus. “The recollections of my earliest years are connected with that chamber, and with its volumes—of which later I will say no more” (209). If only that room could talk! Then perhaps it could tell us both what Egæus forgets and what he thinks it best to conceal from the reader. There is something, however, that the narrator *can* tell us: “Here died my mother. Herein

was I born” (209). Both statements are a little odd. Death must have overtaken his mother very suddenly, otherwise she would have been carried to her room.

And then, it is certainly unusual for someone to be born in a library. So unusual, indeed, that one at first surmises Egæus is not being literal; that he avails himself of poetic license. And his very next sentence, at least the first half of it, appears to bear out this interpretation. He was born in the library, yes: “But it is mere idleness to say that I had not lived before.” Does this mean he was not actually *born* in the library after all? No, that is not what he means at all. He means that it would be idle to say “that the soul has no previous existence. You deny it? — let us not argue the matter. Convinced myself, I seek not to convince” (Poe, “Berenice” 209). In the characteristic fashion of Poe’s earnest narrators, Egæus turns our attention from his particular situation to universals, and from the empirical to the mystical. He now presents his biography rather pompously as a problem in metaphysics, or more precisely, as an allegory of the existential situation of mankind. He thus conveys the impression that he was concerned, even then, only with great cosmic truths, and more particularly with the possibility of the existence of the soul prior to birth. Therefore, it would seem he is not here speaking of his actual life-story. But that is not the question at all—we must not let ourselves be carried away from the matter at hand. The question is whether Egæus means to imply he was *literally* born in the library? One must ultimately conclude that is exactly what he means to imply.

Egæus was born in the library, then, but has some vague recollection of his existence prior to his birth. He explains these recollections by appealing to the popular version of the platonic theory of reminiscence. Having been graced with these reminiscences, he believes in the “pre-existence” of the soul, but implies that those less fortunate cannot be convinced. He describes his recollections from his “preexistence” with some detail: “There is, however, a remembrance of aerial forms—of spiritual and meaning eyes—of sounds, musical yet sad; a remembrance which will not be excluded; a memory like a shadow—vague, variable, indefinite, unsteady; and like a shadow, too, in

the impossibility of my getting rid of it while the sunlight of my reason shall exist” (Poe, “Berenice” 210). A memory like a “shadow” that cannot be dismissed... one could almost say that the narrator was haunted! And of course, he was haunted, by the mysterious dark lady, only he did not realise it. That is why these reminiscences looked “unintelligible” to him.

This mysterious dark lady came to him, precisely, in the library of the “mansion of his fathers” to which his earliest definite memories are connected. He reiterates the connection in a fresh paragraph after the passage I have just transcribed: “In that chamber I was born. Thus, awaking from the long night of what seemed, but was not, nonentity, at once into the very regions of fairy land—into a palace of imagination—into the wild dominions of monastic thought and erudition” (Poe, “Berenice” 210). This declaration is even more implausible than the previous one. Indeed, two equally implausible implications flow from this bizarre statement: first, we are given to understand Egæus remembers *his own birth*; secondly, that he knew how to read from the moment he was born. Following the tone of the narrative, rather than its meaning, the reader will naturally take this as a metaphor; but, as we have seen, this is *not* a metaphor. What does it all mean, then?

Egæus’s mystery has an obvious solution—and only one. Egæus himself tells it to the reader who is, unfortunately, probably too busy looking for the elusive key to all the mysteries of the human condition to notice it. The “preexistence” to which Egæus reminiscences—that is, the images that haunt him—refer “seemed, but was not, nonentity.” He did not spring into existence in the library as a fully qualified reader. It only seems so to him because his earliest memories are connected with that chamber. What this means, of course, is that he could not remember anything of what went on in his life before that fateful occasion in the library to which all his ghosts must be referred. He appears to have found himself in the library, not knowing how he got there—this, of course, happened to him a second time after his expedition to Berenice tomb. And his memories of what appears to him the opening scene of his life are themselves vague and confused—he cannot make head or tail of them. This suggests, of course, amnesia. Evidently, something happened in the library

which made such a powerful impression on him that he forgot everything that came before—but he cannot tell exactly what this momentous event was.

The reader, however, not being afflicted by his peculiar blindness, is in the condition of fathoming this mystery. “Here died my mother. Herein was I born,” he said. The two events were, of course, simultaneous. This is the only thing that makes sense. At this realisation, the whole horrible truth dawns on us irreversibly and at once. The dark lady who haunted Egæus in the library, and who could not possibly be Berenice, is his mother. It all adds up, finally. Egæus *killed his mother*. That was his dark deed (“what was it?”). His earliest recollections are associated with her, and the library, and he is haunted by her image—and particularly by the image of her teeth. He killed her in the library, but he forgot all about it—just as he will later forget all about his other experiments in dental surgery, performed on the body of the dead-alive Berenice. He did tend to forget this sort of thing. Other mysterious phrases in the tale suddenly become painfully obvious clues to the original crime. Egæus grew up with his cousin in his “paternal halls,” but, somewhere along the line, he claims something strange and unaccountable happened:

Disease—a fatal disease, fell like the simoon upon her frame; and, even while I gazed upon her, the spirit of change swept over her, pervading her mind, her habits, and her character, and, in a manner the most subtle and terrible, disturbing even the identity of her person! Alas! The destroyer came and went! — and the victim — where is she? I knew her not — or knew her no longer as Berenice!

(Poe, “Berenice” 211)

Where is the victim? In the library, of course—where Egæus receives the visit of the phantom of a woman that *is not* Berenice, but Egæus’s mother, who had died there, at the hands of her son. Meanwhile, Berenice had not really become another person. Not realising he was haunted, he confuses her with the ghost of his mother. Finally, the two become completely identified in his mind, and he ends up doing to the cousin what he had done to his mother. The story of his mother,



then, is the story “that should not be told.” The “destroyer,” of course, was Egæus himself, and this explains why he was haunted. Now, at last, we begin to understand what that dreadful hereditary “madness” he goes on and on about really amounted to. Apparently, his mother had been the first victim of his obsession with teeth.

This ought to teach us not to look for the meaning of life in a sensational tale, especially when the ominous hints of foul-play are as obvious as they are in “Berenice.” Egæus memories were “replete with horror – horror more horrible from being vague, and terror more terrible from ambiguity,” but “the fearful page in the record of my existence,” as he calls it, is not “written all over with dim, and hideous, and unintelligible recollections” that cannot be deciphered (Poe, “Berenice” 217-18). This is a sly statement of the same challenge the narrator of “The Black Cat” will later make to the reader. These recollections can be deciphered, but not by Egæus.

Yet, even then, in 1835, when *Confessions* was not yet entirely forgotten, no one connected the dots, which is not at all surprising. The connection is indisputable, but it is also dreadfully “mystical.” The reader is confined to the tunnel-vision of a narrator who is not only unable to understand why the ghost of the dark lady visits him, but does not even realise he is being haunted. Poe’s contemporaries did not get the tale, and readings naturally got more obscure and mystical as time went by, and the sources of Poe’s hoax became more and more obscure. Mabbott’s notes on the tale show how thoroughly it bamboozled the scholars of the mid-twentieth century. “This kind of self-hypnotism may have been an experience of the author,” he muses, while searching for clues in the dead-ends to which Egæus constitutive blindness had led him (220n6). He thought that Poe had projected on his character his own experience with “intense and abnormal meditation” (Mabbott, *Tales* 1:211). Mabbott supposed, then, that Poe shared his narrator obsession and no more understood it than he did. But Poe has his own special way of sending the reader on a fool’s errand.

I believe Poe had a final joke in store for us. One of Egæus particular obsessions was of his cousin’s name itself. He tells his peculiar meditations sometimes consisted in a strange verbal

exercise. He liked to “repeat, monotonously, some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any idea to the mind” (Poe, “Berenice” 212). One suspects “Berenice” was one of the words in question—Egæus certainly likes to repeat it. Now, according to him, by concentrating on the sound, he broke the bond between the signifier and the thing signified, and this formed the trigger for his meditations. However, he had previously challenged the reader to find some discernible meaning to his meditations, and the emphasis he places on the sound is suggestive of the mechanism of semantic displacement known as punning.

Some far from meaningless associations, on which Mabbott almost hit, result when we try the experiment Egæus proposes with it. “In Poe’s day,” he writes, “Berenice was pronounced as four syllables, and rhyming with ‘very spicy’” (Mabbott, *Tales* 1:219, note on title). Mabbott appears to have deliberately avoided stating that “Berenice” sounds almost like “very nicey.” Of course, if this was the way the word was read, it would have sounded *exactly* like “bury nicey,” which is funny, in a twisted sort of way, considering that the character of that name gets buried alive in the tale. Maybe Mabbott did not notice the pun which he involuntarily brings to the reader’s attention; or perhaps he felt it was too irrelevant, or ridiculous to mention. It appears to me, however, that the pun is not irrelevant, and that the context, namely Egæus disquisition about the sound of words, actually makes it impossible to dismiss it. I believe, therefore, that this buried joke was intended by Poe. One might say the joke is in bad taste—but then, so was “Berenice.”

In April 1835, only a month after “Berenice” first appeared, Poe published another femicide story, “Morella.” Although it lacks the tell-tale confusion between the lively blonde and the skinny dark ghost, its tone, the outlook of the narrator, and, most of all, his deeds, more than justify its inclusion in the group of Poe’s “femicides.” And this renders the narrator’s use of a biblical image that had been employed by the original femicide meaningful.

I will provide a brief sketch of the tale’s plot. “Morella” is told by a man who married the incredibly learned heroine, who died giving birth to a female girl. Their marriage, he tells us, had

not been like other marriages. Morella was his “friend” and his teacher, but he had never exactly loved her. The night she went into labour, she solemnly announced to her husband both her death and the birth of their child and told him he would never again be happy. For a decade afterwards, the narrator kept their daughter a secret, never even naming her. During this period, he is increasingly disturbed by the uncanny resemblance between the child and her late mother. Finally, after she turned ten, he decided to baptise her. In the crucial moment of the ceremony he feels an irresistible urge to give her her mother’s name. As soon as the word “Morella?” leaves his mouth, the child collapses and replies: “I am here!” (Poe, “Morella” 235). Apparently, she never recovered and died soon after. The narrator is convinced that Morella, who had studied Pythagoras’s theory of transmigration of souls, had reincarnated in her own daughter’s body. This is, at least, the “thesis” which the tale appears designed to illustrate. As so often happens in Poe’s tales, however, it is very hard to tell exactly what the “story” is.

One of the things that disturbs the superficial “thesis” is the way he says Morella’s daughter—for him she is always *her* child—resembled her mother. As she grew, the father noticed she looked, talked, and acted *too much* like her mother. And yet: “Of the mother I had never spoken to the daughter—it was impossible to speak” (Poe, “Morella” 235). He found this similarity deeply disturbing. In fact, he tells us it was more than mere resemblance; he speaks of “shadows, as it were, of similitude,” and of a “too perfect *identity*,” and “above all—oh, above all—in the phrases and expressions of the dead on the lips of the loved and the living, I found food for consuming thought and horror—for a worm that would not die” (“Morella” 234-35).

This image, which ultimately can be traced to *Isaiah*, appears in the very first paragraph of *Confessions*:<sup>46</sup> “Twenty years—and the vision still haunts me!—Yes, it is twenty years since I

46 Mabbott gives the source as *Isaiah* 66.24 (*Tales* 1:237n13). The image reappears in the *Gospels*, more precisely in *Mark* 9:48, however, in a context equally meaningful to our purposes. In both places the never-dying worm conveys the paradoxical idea of the eternal corruption of the flesh, itself a symbol of the punishment of those who renounce God.

The line in *Isaiah* quoted by Mabbott is the last one in the book: “And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be abhorrence to all flesh.” The fate of the rebellious, who will be forgotten, is being contrasted with that of the chosen faithful, whose “name” shall be preserved: “For as the new heavens and the new earth / which I will

perpetrated that crime which has poisoned my existence, and thrown over it a cloud of unutterable sorrow. All other crimes may sleep, but iniquity like mine never can. The worm that dies not preys upon my heart: I am the victim of remorse” (Macnish, *Confessions* 5). The narrator of Macnish’s tale supplies a meaning for the image, which is only too viable in “Morella.” That is, the parallelism between the two tales suggests that the “worm” that gnawed at the mind of the narrator of Poe’s tale was also remorse. For he too had done something terrible to a woman—something which could, figuratively speaking, be construed as femicide, and which may have actually caused her death. And I am not talking about some *hidden* crime. This is something he admits he has done.

He had “snatched” his daughter “from the scrutiny of the world (...), and in the rigorous seclusion of” his “home, watched with an agonising anxiety over all which concerned the beloved” (Poe, “Morella” 234). This went on for “two lustra,” during which she was suffered to remain “nameless upon the earth. ‘My child’ and ‘my love’ were the designations usually prompted by a father’s affection, and the rigid seclusion of her days precluded all other intercourse” (235). In this sentence, while slyly placing the emphasis on the “father’s affection,” the narrator admits his daughter never saw anybody but him. During all this time, she “received no impressions from the

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make / shall remain before me, says the Lord; / so shall your descendants and your name remain” (66. 22). Here the image does not necessarily require a mystical interpretation, as the idea with which it is being contrasted is that of political, rather than personal permanence.

The same cannot be said of the passage in *Mark* where the image reappears in a decisively mystical sense: “And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (9.47-48). Here the original metaphor becomes a symbol of retribution in the afterlife.

The narrator of the tale, very prone to the display of abstruse erudition, alludes to the supposed Hebrew origins of the Christian imagery of Hell, to express the strange change his wife suffered during her pregnancy—of which he appears to have been unaware until the day Morella announced him she was about to give birth to a child: “thus Joy suddenly faded into Horror, and the most beautiful became the most hideous, as Hinnom became Ge-Henna” (Poe, “Morella” 230). This strongly resonates with the image of the never dying worm, used in both the Old and the New Testament.

Mabbott found in Hobbes the theory of the origin of the idea of Hell to which the narrator appears to allude, and transcribes the relevant passage in the hope that “it may clarify Poe’s allusions,” but, as usual, regards it as self-explanatory, though it actually contradicts the narrator’s assertion: “From this abominable place the Jews used (...) to call the place of the damned (...) Gehenna, or valley of Hinnon (...) Gehenna is (...) usually now translated Hell” (236-37 n3). Though Hobbes states that Gehenna/Hinnon became “Hell” (and, by the way, the word in the original Greek of the passage in the Gospel of Mark was itself a transliteration of Gehenna), he does in no way imply that Hinnon *became* Gehenna. In that passage Hobbes also refers that in “the Valley of the Children of Hinnon (...) the Jews had committed most grievous idolatry, sacrificing their children to the idol Moloch” (Mabbott 236 n 3). Poe may have derived the idea of Hinnom *becoming* Gehenna, however, from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “Hinnom, Tophet thence / And black Gehenna called, the type of Hell” (1.404-5).

outward world save such as might have been afforded by the narrow limits of her privacy” (235). And these were very narrow indeed. Through this tour de force in circumlocution, he lets us know he kept her locked up and strictly confined to *his* company for the first decade of her life. Thus, he is responsible, at the very least, for having provided a very unwholesome education to his only daughter. There is ground to suspect a good deal more, but I will leave it at that for now.

Thus, the narrator of “Morella” resembles the women-killers we have looked at before both in his deeds and in the disingenuousness of his tone. This determines the reading of the biblical image I mentioned earlier. The resemblance between the daughter and her mother tormented him: it was “food” for that same “worm that would not die” that William the femicide used as an image of remorse. This sense of the image is consistent with Scripture. It is not clear, however, in what sense the narrator of “Morella” intended the metaphor. He certainly does not betray any signs of remorse for what he did to his daughter. He feels that his daughter *was* his dead wife, and that this fully justified his acts. However, the unusual application of the common metaphor highlights the enormity of his deed. He does not feel remorse or, if he does, is not aware of it. Yet, he had every reason to feel guilty. In fact, in his situation, it would be very strange for him not to be tormented by remorse. This shows us, of course, what kind of man the narrator really is.

Even before the *Confessions*, the image had already been used at least once by a male first-person narrator to express the suffering occasioned by a conscience burthened with murder and femicide. Victor Frankenstein, the protagonist of Mary Shelley’s eponymous novel (1818), believed that his unholy creation had been responsible for the murder of his younger brother William, for which his cousin Justine was tried, convicted and sentenced to death by hanging. “I,” he writes, “not in deed, but in effect, was the true murderer” (90). No one but Victor knew about the monster but, with the argument that his tale would not be believed, he decided to keep silent during Justine’s trial: “when (...) I heard the harsh, unfeeling reasons of these men, my purposed avowal died away on my lips. Thus I might proclaim myself a madman, but not revoke the sentence passed upon my

wretched victim” (86). She met her fate with resignation and a tranquil conscience. “But I,” Victor writes, “the true murderer, felt the never-dying worm alive in my bosom, which allowed of no hope or consolation” (85). Here, the image is employed according to the biblical sense. After her execution, Victor declares himself “seized by remorse and the sense of guilt, which hurried me to a hell of intense tortures, such as no language can describe” (87). Thus, Victor *feels* himself a murderer and a femicide, and uses the worm as an emblem of his hellish suffering. The contrast with “Morella” is eloquent. Victor feels remorse for being the indirect cause of Justine’s suffering; the father of the second Morella, despite having imprisoned his daughter for a decade, claims not to feel any remorse.

Yet, while Victor’s decision to keep his story from the public, and from the “men” that accused and passed sentence on her, may be understandable, his decision to keep the truth from her is not as easy to excuse. His silence, indeed, which added to Justine’s suffering, easily lends itself to a gendered reading. ““Ever since I was condemned,”” Justine recounts, “my confessor has besieged me; he threatened and menaced, until I almost began to think that I was the monster that he said I was” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 84). Pressured by Victor’s silence and the priest’s promptings, his victim, or rather the victim of the monster he had created, is told *she* is a monster, and almost thinks of herself as one. One might say she is the victim of an unlikely male complot, which may easily be read as a metaphor of the male conspiracy against which the author’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, had fought—the conspiracy that silenced women.

Poe’s treacherous biblical allusion is clearly associated, in the kind of modern Gothic literature that inspired his work with femicide and, more broadly, the oppression of women by men, and this has an obvious bearing on the story. At the same time, the character he creates resembles the tyrants of the conventional Gothic much more closely than William or Victor Frankenstein. This is also perfectly representative of Poe’s work of composition. He retained the image, omitting the meaning which the characters in *Frankenstein* and *Confessions* explained, thus leaving his reader to

find exactly what the “worm” meant. In order to do so, however, the reader must reject the complicated, but ultimately absurd mystical thesis developed by the narrator. As usual in Poe’s tales, the “thesis” underlying the tale provides the narrator with a justification for the inhuman treatment to which he subjects the women in the tale, his wife and his child. In this particular tale, the narrator never so much as intimates his remorse—except when he employs the image of the “worm,” but, for reasons I explain below, I believe he was not aware of its meaning.

Indeed, as in the tales we have looked at earlier, the complicated “metaphysics” of the narrator does not constitute, strictly speaking, an explanation, but rather an excuse not to attempt an explanation. In other words, the “metaphysical” theory he develops both justifies and upholds his blindness, which is both moral and intellectual. The narrator is particularly baffled by his wife’s dying words, which he comes to understand as an announcement of her reincarnation in the child she left behind her—his child. This curse deserves a detailed analysis, which, as I said, I will defer to the third chapter of my text. But even the most perfunctory analysis will show that there is something fishy about this narrator. Just as Egæus performed an unutterable “deed” on his mother, the narrator of “Morella” evidently did something equally appalling to his daughter. And the thing is not even hidden, but merely blurred.

He tells us “she was the perfect resemblance of her who had departed, and I loved her with a love more fervent than I had believed it possible to feel for any denizen of earth” (Poe, “Morella” 233). This love was, he claims, soon tainted: “the heaven of this pure affection became darkened, and gloom, and horror, and grief, swept over it in clouds. I said the child grew strangely in stature and intelligence” (230). As his daughter grew, the father was filled with “terrible” and “tumultuous thoughts:” “I daily discovered in the conceptions of the child the adult powers and faculties of the woman;” “the lessons of experience fell from the lips of infancy;” “the wisdom or the passions of maturity I found hourly gleaming from its full and speculative eye” (234). Could he be any clearer?

The younger Morella was fast becoming a woman, and his choice of words clearly evokes the idea of sexual maturity. But he slyly diverts attention from the unavoidable implications of his discourse, by placing the emphasis on “her mental being” (Poe, “Morella” 234). Yet, he was equally interested in, and disturbed by her physical development: “Strange indeed was her rapid increase in bodily size,” he had told us earlier (233). He then sums up his feelings at the time: “all this,” by which he means the intellectual as well as the physical growth of his daughter, “became evident to my appalled senses;” “I could no longer hide it from my soul, nor throw it off from those perceptions which trembled to receive it” (234). Thus, after having spoken of her “passions,” which he thought were those of a “mature” woman, he now makes it very clear that not merely his intellect, but his *senses* were disturbed by his daughter’s growth.

It is impossible not to guess the nature of his terrible, “appalling” thoughts. He was starting to feel for his daughter the same kind of love he had felt for her mother. This evidently suggests, of course, that he was sexually attracted to his infant daughter. Yet, this is where things get really confusing. He had told us earlier that he had never been sexually attracted to Morella—that is, at least, what he appears to tell us in his usual roundabout way. He admits that “my soul, from our first meeting, burned with fires it had never before known; but the fires were not of Eros” (Poe, “Morella” 229). Thus, he had experienced “burning” desire for Morella, but intimates that this desire was not sexual, but rather spiritual in nature.

Yet, the birth of the second Morella itself is evidence that the narrator had sexual intercourse with the first. Indeed, Morella is categorical: it was his child. By his own admission, the possibility of adultery can be ruled out: “She shunned society and attaching herself to me alone rendered me happy” (Poe, “Morella” 225). Therefore, some of that “fire” must have been of “Eros” after all. But that is precisely where the problem lies. His emphatic denial of “Eros” suggests that this was *never* the case, hence, that the pregnancy was a miracle. This suggestion is then reinforced by his “metaphysical” rhetoric—we will look more closely at this rhetoric in the third chapter. Thus, in



practice, the reader is presented with a choice. That is, the reader must decide whether or not to credit the narrator's statement. If true, the birth of the second Morella was indeed wonderful, and we must accept also his other suggestion that she was *all* Morella. But the evidence is all against him. Not only that, he betrays his unreliability in every line of the tale.

The narrator never acknowledges he was sexually attracted to the second Morella, but then, he also asserts that he had "never spoke of passion, nor thought of love" while he lived with the first (Poe, "Morella" 229).<sup>47</sup> Yet, although he might not have spoken of love, or even thought about it, he certainly *made* love to her. According to his own narrative, then, he "loved" both Morellas in exactly the same way—the idea is even reinforced by his claim that they were the same "person." Since his claim—or more precisely, his suggestion—that he was not sexually involved with Morella the first is preposterous, and his "love" for her was not nearly as "pure" as he makes it out to be, we are inevitably drawn to the conclusion that he felt an incestuous desire for his daughter. He desired his daughter, therefore, in exactly the same way he had desired the mother. Which, of course, is what he had been telling us all along.

And what does he do about the "appalling" thoughts he entertained about his daughter? Let us hear the story in his own words: "as years rolled away, and I gazed, day after day, upon her holy, and mild, and eloquent face, and pored over her maturing form, day after day did I discover new points of resemblance in the child to her mother" (Poe, "Morella" 234). He locked her up, prevented anyone else from seeing her, and spent every day "poring" over her "maturing form." Now, at last, he admits he was particularly interested, and disturbed, by her "form." This, of course, practically screams incest. The reader, however, is very apt to overlook the obvious implications of his words. After all, we have been predisposed from the beginning to look for the "metaphysical" in his tale.

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47 We find a similarly emphatic, and equally suspect denial of sexual activity in "Berenice:" "surely I had never loved her. (...) my passions *always were* of the mind. Through the gray of the early morning (...) I had seen her—(...) not as a being of the earth, earthy, but as the abstraction of such a being (...); not as an object of love, but as a theme of the most abstruse although desultory speculation" (Poe, 214). Dawn Keetley has convincingly argued that Berenice was, like Morella, pregnant at the time of her death: "The marriage may be explained (...) by Berenice's pregnancy, for the narrator only mentions it after 'bitterly lamenting her fallen and desolate condition' and after having 'called to mind that she ha[s] loved [him] long'" (*Pregnant Women* 5).

But let us forget about metaphysics. The story, in its bare outline, is very simple. It is almost like a fairy tale. I am thinking of one specific fairy tale which deals with a father that is similarly tormented by a too perfect resemblance between a female daughter and her dead mother. Morella, as I have already mentioned, makes a long and complicated death-bed speech to her husband—at least, her husband finds it very complicated. The gist of this speech, however, is also very simple: she informs her husband that she is about to die, and also that she will give birth to a child, adding that “the hours of thy happiness are over, and joy is not gathered twice in a life” (Poe, “Morella” 233). She thus predicts that her husband will not remarry, or rather, she solemnly intimates him not to. The resemblance with the dying queen’s speech of Perrault’s “Peau d’Ane” is remarkable:

Arrivé à sa dernière heure  
Elle dit au Roi son Époux:  
‘Trouvez bon qu’avant que je meure  
J’exige une chose de vous;  
C’est que s’il vous prenait envie  
De vous remarier quand je n’y serais plus... (*Contes* 59)

At this point, the king interrupts her—much like the narrator of “Morella” interrupts his wife:

— Ah! dit le Roi, ces soins sont superflus,  
Je n’y songerais de ma vie,  
Soyez en repos là-dessus. (Perrault, *Contes* 59)

This reply manifests a premature wish to see the wife safely buried, which is a very unloving thought for a husband to express at such a juncture. Incidentally, Poe’s narrator also confesses he yearned for his pregnant wife’s death: “Shall I then say that I longed with an earnest and consuming desire for the moment of Morella’s decease? I did” (Poe, “Morella” 232). Unperturbed by the interruption, Perrault’s queen resumes her speech:

“Je le crois bien, reprit la Reine,  
Si j’en prends à témoin votre amour véhément;  
Mais pour m’en rendre plus certaine,  
Je veux avoir votre serment,  
Adouci toutefois par ce tempérament  
Que si vous rencontrez une femme plus belle,  
Mieux faite et plus sage que moi,  
Vous pourrez franchement lui donner votre foi  
Et vous marriez avec elle”  
Sa confiance en ses attraits  
Lui faisait regarder une telle promesse  
Comme un serment surpris avec adresse,  
De ne se marier jamais. (Perrault, *Contes* 60)

The husband promised her what she asked and mourned his loss very loudly. The shrewd narrator cynically remarks: “A l’ouïr sangloter et les nuits et les jours, / On jugea que son deuil ne lui durerait guère, / Et qu’il pleurait ses défuntes Amours / Comme un homme pressé qui veut sortir d’affaire” (Perrault, *Contes* 60). Sure enough, the king soon decided to remarry, and looked about him for a way to do it without breaking his oath: “Il fallait garder son serment / Et que la nouvelle Épousée / Eût plus d’attraits et d’agrément / Que celle qu’on venait de mettre au monument” (60). And he found only one woman that fulfilled the conditions that his wife had imposed on him.

His and the dead queen’s daughter “possédait certains tendres appas / Que la défunte n’avais pas,” and the bereaved king felt himself “brûlant d’un amour extrême” for her. This, he thought, was the only woman that could compare to her mother, and therefore he proceeded to court her forthwith. The basic storyline runs perfectly parallel with “Morella,” but its ending contrasts eloquently with that of Poe’s tale. The incestuous father at length marries his daughter to a young

prince from a nearby kingdom, and, if he does not forget his love, its “fires” are channelled to a socially acceptable object: “le Père de l’Épousée, / Qui d’elle autrefois amoureux / Avait avec le temps purifiés les feux / Dont son Âme était embrasée. / Il en avait banni tout désir criminel / Et de cette odieuse flamme / Le peu qui restait dans son âme / N’en rendait que plus vif son amour paternel” (Perrault, *Contes* 74). Significantly, the metaphor of “fire” is employed in both stories as a metaphor for the love of the father for his daughter: for, as we have seen, the father in “Morella” “loved” his daughter “with a love more fervent than I had believed it possible to feel for any denizen of earth” (Poe, “Morella” 233 emphasis mine). The word, of course, evokes the idea of fire, thereby indicating that the “fires” were even more intense now than they had been while the first Morella lived. But, while the king’s desire becomes paternal love, and is therefore “purified,” the opposite seems to take place in “Morella.”

The corollary of the second Morella’s unwholesome upbringing in exclusive “intercourse” with her father, is the scene of her baptism, at age ten, which symbolically re-enacts the narrator’s wedding with her mother. Indeed, the ceremony is the ritual consecration of the narrator’s perception that the child is her mother. The narrator, moreover, claims that the decision to name the daughter after her mother was not the result of forethought, but of a sudden impulse, which he regards as some sort of demoniacal epiphany, which is tacitly associated with Morella’s dealings with evil supernatural powers. “What demon urged me to breathe that sound, which, in its very recollection was wont to make ebb the purple blood in torrents from the temples to the heart? What fiend spoke from the recesses of my soul, when, amid those dim aisles, and in the silence of the night, I whispered within the ears of the holy man the syllables—Morella” (Poe, “Morella” 235).<sup>48</sup> Thus, he disavows all responsibility for the choice of the name, suggesting that this had been ordained by a higher, unspeakably evil power that presided over his existence and determined his

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48 This sentence throws additional suspicion over the ceremony. It was performed in the nighttime, and in some unspecified location referred to by the ambiguous phrase “dim aisles.” All this suggests that it was a clandestine ceremony, a suggestion that is reinforced by the fact of the narrator’s “whispering” the name “within the ears of the holy man.” Was this “holy man” a priest at all? I cannot help but wonder.

acts. At the same time, of course, through the magical act of naming, his desire for his daughter is justified, and she officially takes the place of her mother by her father's side. Incidentally, the narrator himself intimates that the real purpose of the ceremony was to legitimise the unusual "intercourse" he maintained with his daughter: "at length the ceremony of baptism presented to my mind (...) a present deliverance from the terrors of my destiny" (235).

The narrator makes it seem she died at the very moment when her father gave the unnamed child the name that had been her mother's—which of course would have put an end to their cohabitation. It looks that way, but as usual, the narrator does not exactly say so. This is yet another notable instance of misdirection, or weasel-wording. As he called her by the name of her mother, the child's face turned "the hues of death" and she fell "prostrate on the black slabs of our ancestral vault" ("Morella" 235). The dark intimations of impending doom up to this point predispose the reader to automatically assume that the girl died, but the sentence also admits a different interpretation: she may have merely swooned. This is followed by the last paragraph of the tale, which, instead of clarifying the matter, is even more ominously ambiguous:

And I kept no reckoning of time or place, and the stars of my fate faded from heaven, and therefore the earth grew dark, and its figures passed by me, like flitting shadows, and among them all I beheld only—Morella. The winds of the firmament breathed but one sound within my ears, and the ripples upon the sea murmured evermore—Morella. But she died; and with my own hands I bore her to the tomb; and I laughed with a long and bitter laugh as I found no trace of the first, in the charnel where I laid the second—Morella. (Poe, "Morella" 236)<sup>49</sup>

Everything in these last few sentences is ambiguous. It is impossible to say whether the second Morella died soon after her baptism or years later: the narrator did *not* keep track of time.

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49 There is some resemblance between this sentence and the line from "Peau d'Ane" I quoted above, not so much in words, perhaps, but in feeling. The widowed king compares potential candidates to be his wife with "celle qu'on venait de mettre au monument," feeling that none *but* his daughter fulfilled the conditions his late wife had imposed on him. In "Morella" the same comparison is implied.

And if, as this seems to indicate, she survived her baptism, what was he doing during the time that mediated between it and her death? Presumably, he kept passionately “poring” over her “maturing form” and indulging his unutterable desire.

Finally, the very last sentence suggests that the corpse of the first Morella was gone from the “charnel.” But this too is ambiguous. Mabbott rightly points out a resemblance between Poe’s tale and the “The Dead Daughter” by Henry Glassford Bell, though it seems to me a manifest overstatement to say that “Poe’s plot comes almost entirely from” it (*Tales* 1:222). In any case, Mabbott does not list the differences, which are equally significant. One major difference is that the last sentence in Glassford’s tale is completely unambiguous: “*the corpse was gone*” (Poe, “Morella” 224). The narrator of Morella suggests that the same happened to him, but he is far from stating it. He found no trace of the first in the tomb where he placed the corpse of the second Morella. The reader will naturally assume that the corpses were deposited in the same place—but he will do so at his own risk. In a tale like this, one can never be too careful. The narrator’s words can be given an entirely different, indeed an opposite construal. He may simply be saying that after she died, he did not see that “perfect identity” between his daughter and her mother which had him so worked-up before. In other words, one may suppose the narrator recognised at that juncture that his daughter was *not* her mother. This, of course, would surprise no one *but* the narrator.

In short, not one aspect of the yarn that exempts the narrator from blame holds up to scrutiny. The evidence that he maintained an incestuous relationship with his own daughter, on the other hand, is virtually irrefutable. Indeed, the profound motivation of his rhetoric may be to free him from the accusation of incest. He systematically erases his role in her birth, thereby suggesting that she was not *his* daughter—she was Morella herself. Technically, then, his love for his daughter could never be construed as incest. Even in a straight reading of the tale, he made her short life miserable beyond conception, by treating her as if she were her mother.

The comparison with Perrault's fables is useful because it shows how simple and straightforward the storyline in these tales is, and how it gets obscured by the narrator's complicated jargon. Like Macnish, Poe evidently tapped the same gallery of horrors from which the Gothic novelists had culled their villains, making them the narrators of their own tales: first the demented dental surgeon, then the incestuous father, who adds incest to injury. Still, "Berenice" and "Morella" are excessively nebulous affairs compared with "Ligeia," which I regard as the crowning achievement of the genre. By the time he wrote his devilishly sophisticated retelling of the "bluebeard" myth, Poe had much perfected his technique of misdirection.

## 6 – *Modus Operandi*: Poe's Theory of the Mystery

Thus, in Poe's covert femicides all adds up in the end. When the reader hits on the simple story that makes all the apparent misfits in the plot fall into place, it imposes itself at once with all the force of recognition. This is equally true of "Berenice," "Morella," and "Ligeia." The reader may argue, however, that the case against Poe's narrators relies entirely on circumstantial evidence and, therefore, that we could never pin the rap on them. As a further objection, the argument could be made that things seldom add up so perfectly in real life. All this is true.

I admit that the prosecution's case in these tales is wholly circumstantial. Even worse, the case is entirely based on what we might term "internal evidence." On the subject of "internal evidence" in hoaxes Poe had a lot to say. In the March 1848 installment of the *Marginalia* (number 200 in Pollin's edition), for example, he mocks the circular argument involved in "what people call testing a thing by 'internal evidence'" (Poe, *Brevities* 333). The episode that occasioned this quip was the publication of "Mesmeric Revelation" by *The Popular Record of Modern Science*, a London paper which claimed that the story was authentic. "The *Record*," Poe writes,

insists upon the truth of the story because of certain facts—because 'the initials of the young men must be sufficient to establish their identity'—because 'the nurses *must* be accessible to all sorts of inquiries'—and because the 'angry excitement and various rumors which at length rendered a public statement necessary, are sufficient to show that *something* extraordinary must have taken place.

To be sure! The story is proved by these facts—the facts about the students, the nurses, the excitement, the credence given the tale of New York. And now all we have to do is to prove these facts. Ah!—*they* are proved *by the story*.

(Poe, *Brevities* 333)



Analysis of “internal evidence” is, of course, no test of fact. The idea that one can decide of the validity of a report concerning events in the physical world without reference to any sort of empirical data rests on an obvious fallacy. No empirical test is required to rule out an inconsistent theory, that is, one which breaks the law of non-contradiction. Thus, there is such a thing as “internal evidence” of *inauthenticity*. But one cannot infer from the fact that all authentic reports are consistent that all consistent reports are authentic—this is a classic example of *non distributio medii*. Poe called the article of the *Record*: “One of the happiest examples, in a small way, of the carrying-one’s-self-in-a-hand-basket logic” (*Brevities* 331). I say that “internal evidence” is no test of fact *in real life*. And this because we cannot reasonably expect consistency from real life. But we can and do expect it from fiction. This consistency is, in the final analysis, the substratum of Poe’s mysteries. In other words, consistency is the basic assumption that underlies every single inference leading to the solution of the mystery.

But some may still ask: if Poe wanted his reader to solve the mystery that baffled his narrator, why did he not say so? I could answer that, while he did not exactly say so, Poe did throw many hints that things were not what they seemed in his tales, and give the *New World* note about “Ligeia” as an example. But that would be skirting the issue. I will provide two straight answers. Poe did not say so, first, because he did not want the solution to the mystery to be revealed too soon, as this would, according to his theory of the mystery, deprive it of its main interest; the other reason why he did not give away the solution was because he thought that, strictly speaking, a writer could not provide solutions for any of the tales he published. According to him, the solution had to be there in latency. This not being the case, the writer could not impose one *ex cathedra*. If the solution, on the other hand, was indeed at the reach of analysis, he thought he would pay himself a disservice by explaining it to his readers.

Poe developed his theory of the “mystery” story in criticism, most notably in the second of two reviews of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, and in his two reviews of Dickens’s

*Barnaby Rudge*, published in May 1841 in the *Saturday Evening Post*, and in *Graham's* in February 1842. According to Poe, the expectations a mystery creates on a reader are invariably disappointed by its solution: "the anticipation must surpass the reality; (...) no matter how terrific be the circumstances which, in the *dénouement*, shall appear to have occasioned the expression of countenance worn habitually by Mrs. Rudge," for example, "still they will not be able to satisfy the mind of the reader. He will surely be disappointed" (Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1842] 239). Moreover, Dickens throws his reader off by hinting of supernatural agency. Poe does point out that, though this may not be the main focus, the novel is a variation on the explained supernatural. In fact, the error with which Poe taxes Dickens is the same Coleridge had accused Radcliffe of committing:

the same mysterious terrors are continually exciting in the mind the idea of a supernatural appearance, keeping us, as it were, upon the very edge and confines of the world of spirits, and yet are ingeniously explained by familiar causes; curiosity is kept upon the stretch from page to page, and from volume to volume, and the secret, which the reader thinks himself every instant on the point of penetrating, flies like a phantom before him, and eludes his eagerness till the very last moment of protracted expectation. (...) Curiosity is raised oftener than it is gratified; or rather, it is raised so high that no adequate gratification can be given it.

(Coleridge, Rev. of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* 203-204)

Poe agreed that this was the great disadvantage of the *explained* mystery. In his tales, however, Poe found a way to avoid disappointing the average reader, while rewarding the efforts of the analytical: this was the *unexplained* mystery the possibility of which he slyly intimates. Though they made sense enough for most of the public, his mysteries remained mysterious enough to keep even those readers who could not find the solution curious, and therefore interested and entertained. When the true story, which the author had cunningly obscured, was finally detected, the joy of discovery would hopefully effectively counterbalance the disappointment of the diligent reader.

Thus, Poe appears to have thought that it was not convenient for a writer to clarify the meaning of a mystery, either by having a character explain it, or by pointing out the solution, as it were, in person, and history seems to have proven him right. Though many have questioned his place in the canon of world literature, Poe has remained permanently in popular demand, and I suspect his mysteries have much to do with that.

The reviews of *Barnaby Rudge* (both of them) also clearly express Poe's view that the solution to a mystery, whether the author chose to reveal it to the reader or not, had to be implied by the text, and a consequence of the plot. In other words, whether the solution was a consequence, or more precisely the only possible consequence of the tale, and therefore within the reach of analysis, albeit not apparent, or the tale was no mystery. For, as we will soon see, Poe thought that a mystery with no solution—that is, a definite, intelligible solution—was a contradiction in terms. Not even the author's own authority could impose a solution on the reader that was not rigorously coded. Poe forcibly demonstrated his point in the first of his reviews of Dickens's novel by boldly predicting its *dénouement*, hence the solution to the mystery, when only a few chapters had been published. Indeed, Dickens first printed the novel as a serial in his own periodical, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, from February to November 1841; Poe's solution was published in May 1841. Poe's prophecy is based on his assessment of the author's intention, as manifested in the portion of the work that had already been printed. In this sense, the question is, for Poe, strictly a matter of criticism, understood as the analysis of the art of writing:

The design of Mr. Dickens is here two-fold—first that of increasing our anticipation in regard to the deed committed—exaggerating our impression of its atrocity—and, secondly, that of causing this horror of blood on the part of the idiot [the eponymous character], to bring about, in consistence with poetical justice, the condemnation of the murderer:—for it is a murder that has been committed. We say in accordance with poetical justice—and, in fact, it will be seen hereafter that Barnaby, the idiot, is

the murderer's own son. The horror of blood which he feels is the mediate result of the atrocity, since this atrocity is was which impressed the imagination of the pregnant mother; and poetical justice will therefore be well fulfilled when this horror shall urge on the son to the conviction of the father in the perpetrator of the deed. (Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1841] 219).

Poe goes on to reveal the identity of the victim, Ruben Haredale, the circumstances of his murder, and of Mr. Rudge, Sr.'s disappearance.

Even if Dickens himself were to contradict the predictions Poe made from the first published chapters of his novel, as he eventually did, in some minor details, he would be wrong, for Poe had only brought out the solution that was latent in the text. In fact, Poe insists that, once the text is published, the writer who created it has no more authority over it than the reader. And this applies even to the published chapters of a serial. Thus, in a sense, Poe proclaimed the "death of the author" more than a century before Roland Barthes popularised the idea.

But, while structuralist and post-structuralist conceptions of literature have brought into question the correlation between the intentions of the writer and the meaning of a text, Poe's conception of authorship relies on a very robust understanding of intention, and places great faith in the writer's ability to control the reader's response to the text. These notions are involved in his theory of the mystery. According to Poe, and he was adamant on this point, every self-respecting artist tried his best to be as consistent as possible. Thus, the writer should start by establishing a clear conception of the plot, from beginning to end, and then make sure that every detail, every word, tended to the preestablished *dénouement*. Theoretically, therefore, the *dénouement* could be omitted, and be inferred from the tale, provided, of course, the narrative was sufficiently consistent. "Ligeia," however, clearly lacks a formal *dénouement*; it ends with a climax which is not explicitly resolved in the tale. Indeed, the climax, or crisis, is the point in which the accumulated tension of

the plot reaches its peak; this tension seeks resolution and, in this sense, tends—or should tend, according to the classical Aristotelian understanding of poetry—to the *dénouement*.

The theory of the mystery that I have been outlining is a paraphrase of statements contained in Poe's two reviews of *Barnaby Rudge*, in the first of which Poe had forcibly demonstrated that the *dénouement* of a consistent plot *could be* omitted—by anticipating the ending of Dicken's mystery. In this sense, therefore, the mystery form was itself a demonstration of his theory of poetry. Thus, if, in a sense, Poe broke literary etiquette by revealing the murder the author had intended to reveal himself, he also paid the English writer a compliment, albeit a very condescending one, for, ultimately, Poe's inferences must be traced to the fundamental assumption that the author had decided on a particular *dénouement* before he started writing, and written with this always in view. According to Poe, this was the only artistic way to write.

However, he follows this implied compliment, in the second review of *Barnaby Rudge*, which appeared after the whole novel had been published, with the claim that Dickens had betrayed his initial conception: "It is, perhaps, but one of a thousand instances of the disadvantages, both to the author and the public, of the present absurd fashion of periodical novel-writing, that our author had not sufficiently considered or determined upon *any* particular plot when he began the story now under review" (Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1842] 236). He then instances this statement with many inconsistencies in Dickens's plot, which he takes as evidence that Dickens had changed his mind halfway through his novel. In other words, according to Poe, he had the intention of writing precisely the story Poe had deduced from his earlier chapters, and had succeeded in realizing that intention, thus enabling Poe to complete the story. Then, after those chapters were published, Dickens changed the design.

Poe certainly has a point there. Poe's deductions are, for the most part, borne out by Dickens sequel. Rudge, Sr. is finally revealed as the murderer of Reuben Haredale. But not by the means Poe

had predicted. He had predicted that his son's "awe" of blood would ultimately lead to his father's apprehension. In the finished novel, however,

this horror of blood is *inconsequential*; and of this we complain. Strongly insisted upon in the beginning of the narrative, it produces no adequate result. And here how fine an opportunity Mr. Dickens has missed! The conviction of the assassin, after the lapse of twenty-two years, might easily have been brought about through his son's mysterious awe of blood—*an awe created in the unborn by the assassination itself*—and this would have been one of the finest possible embodiments of the idea which we are accustomed to attach to "poetical justice."

(Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* (1842) 243)

And Poe is right. Whatever other merits the novel might have, Dickens appears to have forgotten all about poor Barnaby's horror of blood. Poe's earlier deductions, as I said, presuppose that the author had that degree of foresight necessary to the management of "plot," the defining quality of which, according to his definition, is consistency. "Nothing is more clear," Poe wrote, "than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before any thing be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention" ("Philosophy of Composition" 60). This is from the second paragraph of "The Philosophy of Composition," originally published in 1846. In the opening sentence of this essay, Poe explicitly identifies the essay as a restatement of the ideas he had developed in his discussion of *Barnaby Rudge*: "Charles Dickens, in a note now lying before me, alluding to an examination I once made of the mechanism of 'Barnaby Rudge,' says, 'By the way, are you aware that Godwin wrote his 'Caleb Williams' backwards?'" ("Philosophy of Composition" 60). With "Philosophy," therefore, Poe ostensibly proposes to correct Dickens's understanding of "plot." However, though he places the emphasis, with the characteristic petulance

of his critical persona, on pre-conception, the chief animus of his review is, I believe, that of satirizing the foolishness of “periodical novel writing.”

Poe’s two reviews of *Barnaby Rudge*, like “Philosophy,” are of course more important as statements of Poe’s ideas on mysteries, than as a criticism of Dickens’s novel. The latter may or may not have agreed with Poe’s views of the importance of consistency—like most writers, he may well have thought that consistency could be sacrificed to maintain suspense. The reader certainly is under no obligation to accept Poe’s critical standards—especially because they appear not to have matched Dickens’s. It is my conviction that all great works of art in a sense contain their own critical standard, and that the measure of the artists success is, at least in part, the extent to which he was able to adhere to these unstated rules. Dickens perhaps did not value consistency as highly as Poe. And, of course, some readers may even prefer Dickens’s inconsistencies over Poe’s consistencies. On my part, I hope that I will never be called upon to choose between the two. But that is not the point. It is only fair to suppose that Poe would do, as an author, what he expected from Dickens; that he would himself abide by the rules to which he holds others.

His reviews of *Barnaby Rudge* show that Poe thought that mysteries in fiction should have a solution, that this should not be beyond the means of an inquisitive reader, and that consistency was the only way to guarantee this. *Rudge* contained, from its first chapters, clues to a hidden murder—therefore, Poe thought, there had to be a hidden murder in the tale. Thus, Poe places himself in the shoes of readers of tales like “Ligeia.” There is no manifest crime in that tale, it is true, yet no one would deny—and no one ever did, I think—that there are many clues to murder in “Ligeia.” The most conspicuous of these are some ghostly drops of poison falling from an “invisible spring” into Rowena’s wine (“Ligeia” 325). Yet, very few critics have valued such indications. G. R. Thompson, in his influential book *Poe’s Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales* (1973) attempted to put an end to what he regarded as idle speculation, arguing that Poe intended the events in that tale, what I called its “story,” to be indeterminate. The mystery in the tale, Thompson thought, was

unfathomable, and its solution could only be imperfectly glimpsed, never clearly defined or understood.

Some have even seen the following passage in Poe's second criticism of *Barnaby Rudge* as a statement of this view: "These intimations—these dark hints of some uncertain evil," such as Poe found in the first installments of Dickens's novel, "are often rhetorically praised as effective but are only justly so praised where there is *no dénouement* whatever—where the reader's imagination is left to clear up the mystery for itself—and, this, we suppose, is not the design of Mr. Dickens" (Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1841] 219).

For Bruce I. Weiner, "Poe is distinguishing those webs the mystery writer weaves for the express purpose of unravelling and those mysteries of the human condition, those 'dark hints of some uncertain evil,' which cannot be explained" ("Metaphysical Art" 44). A few years earlier, Elsa Nettels had misinterpreted this passage in a similar way: "Here Poe criticized Dickens for attempting to explain mysterious events so portentous that even the most horrific circumstances devised to account for them could not satisfy the reader. Dickens would have been well advised, Poe argued, to attempt no explanation whatever and allow the reader's imagination to satisfy itself" ("Poe and James" 6). By this, as her comparison with Henry James's fiction shows, Nettels means to say that Poe was of the opinion that "dark hints" were only artistic when the mystery was unsolvable. Poe is in fact saying that they are only legitimate when the author is aware of a solution he omits from his narrative.

Indeed, the "dark hints of some uncertain evil" referred by Poe are the clues to a murder committed by the "idiot" Barnaby's father, when his mother was pregnant. Poe is speaking of such things as the birthmark in Barnaby's wrist, his "*awe of blood—an awe created in the unborn by the assassination itself*" (Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1841] 220), or some apparent incoherencies in his ravings. As regards the last, Poe remarks that "almost every word spoken by him will be found to



have an undercurrent of meaning, by paying strict attention to which, the enjoyment of the imaginative reader will be infinitely heightened” (222).

All these things darkly hint of murder, no question about it, and Poe had no problem with that. What Poe questions is the adaptation of such clues to Dickens’s design, and this for a very specific reason: such hints *of murder* are not suitable for tales where the author designs to *reveal* the murder to the reader. Poe tells us—without any ambiguity—that such hints are only suitable for tales with no *dénouement*—that is, in tales where the reader must deduce it. The “mystery” of the tale, indeed, is clearly defined by the omission of this *dénouement*. And of course, where this cannot be deduced, there is, according to Poe’s theory, no “plot.” This, however, was not “the design of Mr. Dickens,” who intended to enact his *dénouement*, sparing the reader the work of deducing it. No, this was a design peculiar to Poe. Indeed, it clearly follows from his argument that his tales, where similar hints are present, and the *dénouement* absent, should be subjected to the same kind of reading to which Poe subjected Dickens’s incomplete novel, to reveal the hidden crime that alone can justify the artist’s hints. Poe’s success in discovering the crime really proves his point. For a careful reader like himself, indeed, the explanation was in a matter superfluous.

In the second article he wrote on *Barnaby Rudge*, published in *Graham’s* in February 1842, after the whole novel had been published, Poe elaborates on his theory of the management of the “mystery.” Some crucial facts in the story were “sedulously kept from the reader’s knowledge:” “We say sedulously; for, *the intention once known*, the *traces* of the design can be found in every page” (Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1842] 232). As an illustration, Poe singles out an “ingenious” passage in which, according to him, the author tricks the reader into believing Solomon Daisy saw a ghost: “The impression here skillfully conveyed is, that the ghost seen is that of Reuben Haredale; and the mind of the not-too-acute reader is at once averted from the true state of the case—from the murderer, Rudge, living in the body” (233). The not-too-acute reader, of course, as opposed to the “imaginative,” mentioned in a previous quotation, who is able to detect the author’s design before

the solution is given, which, as may be surmised from Poe's analysis, should be inherent to the text: "if we did not rightly prophesy, yet, at least, our prophecy *should have been* right" (235).

When Poe says, therefore, that it is only legitimate for an author to hint of a crime when the reader is given no *dénouement*, he is not saying, as Weiner supposes, that the mystery must be unfathomable, but merely that the solution, although not apparent, should be coded so that reader may find it, like Poe did, with a little effort. Whether the author intends to reveal the mystery himself, in true Radcliffian fashion (or to let a character like Dupin make a dramatic revelation of it), or prefers to leave the reader in the dark with no written *dénouement*—a possibility clearly intimated by Poe—, he must take good care "that the secret be well kept" (Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1842] 234). That is, the writer must be reasonably sure that the not-so-acute readers will receive the false impression he "sedulously" conveys, not apprehending the hidden meaning before the writer intended it to be discovered. That is, the solution must not emerge spontaneously from the reading—it must be eked out by a deliberate exertion of the problem-solving faculties.

For example, the average reader should not be allowed to realise that Solomon Daisy did not see a ghost. "If the mystery leak out, against the author's will, his purposes are immediately at odds and ends; for he proceeds upon the supposition that certain impressions *do* exist, which do *not* exist, in the mind of his readers" (Poe, Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1842] 234). This places much more confidence in the power of the writer to control the reader's responses than was generally allowed by Romanticism. Indeed, even in our post-Romantic times, most of us would no doubt be inclined to reject such pretensions. Besides, judging from most critical portraits of Poe, one would say that he, of all writers, was the least in control of his material. This evident challenge to some of those basic notions which Poe is usually said to have taken too far, however, perhaps because it was overshadowed by the vicious stab at Dickens in the very next sentence, has gone mostly unremarked:

We are not prepared to say, so positively as we would wish, whether, by the public at large, the whole *mystery* of the murder committed by Rudge (...) was fathomed at any period previous to the period intended, or, if so, whether at a period so early as materially to interfere with the interest designed; but we are forced, through sheer modesty, to suppose this the case; since, by ourselves individually, the secret was distinctly understood immediately upon the perusal of the story of Solomon Daisy, which occurs at the seventh page of this volume of three hundred and twenty-three.

(Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1842] 234)

Poe certainly is boasting—in fact, he is being a little obnoxious. But I think most critics have not understood exactly what it is that he is boasting of. Poe’s point is that, in order to use “dark hints,” one must be able to keep his secret better than Dickens had, by ingenuity alone, that is, tricking the reader into the wrong conclusions. But the writer must never assert falsities—as Poe’s use of the word “sedulously,” meaning without guile, indicates. That would be most unsportsmanlike. Poe calls it “a misdemeanor against Art” (Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1842] 234). In the matter of the ghost, however, Poe is enough of a gentleman to concede Dickens had not sinned against art: “The writer has not asserted it in his own person, but ingeniously conveyed an idea (false in itself, yet a belief in which is necessary for the effect of the tale) by the mouth of one of his characters” (Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1842] 234). By “the person of the author” Poe means the third-person, non-participant narrator, as opposed to the ostensibly fictional characters. This narrator is invested by the reader with the authority of a mouthpiece of the writer. Poe scorns to convey false impressions through it—this would be inartistic. Dickens, it is implied, took, in this particular case, the artistic approach to conveying a false impression. Poe, on the other hand, never used the reassuringly authoritative voice of a third-person non-participant narrator in his fiction.

The “Art” to which Poe is referring, then, is certainly not that of intimating “unfathomable” mysteries, but rather that of keeping the reader from finding a solution that is contained, in latency,

in the text. In this sense, Poe basically adhered to Radcliffe's approach to the mystery in fiction, which was described with great acumen in the review of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* commonly attributed to Coleridge which I have quoted earlier. Radcliffe had developed, the reviewer insightfully remarks, an "art of escaping the guesses of the reader," an art which had to be "improved and brought to perfection along with the reader's sagacity; just as the various inventions of locks, bolts, and private drawers, in order to secure, fasten, and hide, have always kept pace with the ingenuity of the pickpocket and house breaker, whose profession is to unlock, unfasten, and lay open what you have taken so much pains to conceal" (Coleridge, Rev. of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* 203).

This is precisely the kind of art Poe implies Dickens had attempted to master. The art of keeping exactly one step ahead of the reader. The writer should so manage the mystery as to constantly exhibit the solution right in front of the reader's nose, without ever letting it become too obvious. Indeed, the "hints" of which Poe speaks should be contrived so that their significance eludes the reader unacquainted with the "key" to the mystery, and yet be perfectly evident, in retrospect, to the same reader when acquainted with it. "Let him [the reader] *re-peruse* "Barnaby Rudge," and, with a pre-comprehension of the mystery, these points of which we speak break out in all directions like stars, and throw quadruple brilliance over the narrative—a brilliance which a correct taste will at once declare unprofitably sacrificed to the keenest interest of mere mystery" (Poe, Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1842] 233).

The last remark may appear to support the claim that Poe was against all but unfathomable mysteries. If mystery is a good thing, provided the reader is not immediately aware of the solution, would it not be enough for the writer to appear mysterious? This is precisely what Yvor Winters thought Poe was doing. But that is not the meaning of Poe's sentence at all. The "points" with a hidden meaning "are (...) deprived of all effect, and become null, through the impossibility of comprehending them without the key," and so, until the intended moment of revelation, the tale will

be necessarily insipid, unless some other interest than “mere mystery” is provided, to balance that insipidity (Poe, Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* (1842) 233). And there is plenty to interest the reader in Poe’s tales, besides the mystery. Indeed, alternate sources of interest, like metaphysics and abstruse lore, distract the reader from the fairy-tale-like simplicity of the mysterious storyline; that is, they contribute to the atmosphere of mystery. By this system, Poe found a way to navigate between insipidity and an exaggerated perspicuity, both of which would alienate the public.

Intimating a murder when none had been committed would be no more artistic than lying to the reader. It would be cheating. The key must be there, but unperceived—that is what Poe calls art. Poe is not merely exhibiting his skill as a critical sleuth. He is making a point in poetics—a strictly Aristotelian point. According to Aristotle, the *dénouement*, that is, the discovery or anagnorisis, is “as the term itself implies, a change from ignorance to knowledge,” and it is “most effective when it coincides with reversals;” a “reversal” (peripeteia), in turn, is defined as “a change of the situation into the opposite” (*Poetics* 1452a). A plot (mythos) is “complex,” according to Aristotle, when “discovery” and “reversal” are simultaneous. Both reversals and discoveries “should result from the actual structure of the plot in such a way that what has already happened makes the result inevitable or probable; for there is indeed a vast difference between what happens propter hoc and post hoc” (1452a). Consequently, Aristotle decries “episodic” plots “in which the episodes do not follow each other probably or inevitably,” praising instead integrated plots in which the “incidents are unexpected and yet one is a consequence of the other” (*Poetics* 1452a). Hence, the plot must progress steadily and inevitably to its ending, which must be recognised as its consequence, but, at the same time, the reader, or spectator, as the case may be, must be distracted from the *inevitability* of the *dénouement*. Tragedy, it also follows, must then convey a false impression to the reader in order that the ending may be both unexpected and inherent to the plot.

Like Poe, Aristotle thought that arbitrary twists of plot, though unexpected, were not “artistic.” Therefore, the idea that the ending can be anticipated by critical analysis is a logical

development from the Aristotelian poetics of the tragedy. However, the idea of omitting the “discovery,” leaving it to the reader, is entirely Poe’s own. Indeed, in his reviews of Dickens’s mystery novel, as well as the anonymous review of his own *Tales* and the mysterious note on “Ligeia,” he indirectly claims priority for this idea.

In his mysteries, then, Poe took the opportunity Dickens had missed. For these are oriented, as I have attempted to demonstrate, to a discovery that is not enacted in the tale itself. The discovery in “Berenice,” that the narrator killed his mother, for example, corresponds perfectly to Aristotle’s “anagnorisis,” which may come in different forms. For example, “one may discover whether some one has done something or not” (*Poetics* 1452a). And this discovery also implies a “reversal,” namely in the reader’s perception of the narrator’s character. The public knew he had done something, but, the crucial deed, matricide, of which the whole plot is a consequence, and from which all incidents flow, is craftily withheld from view. This work of camouflage, however, is achieved through purely “artistic” means, that is, without lies or reversals not inherent to the plot.

The moral of Poe’s review is that one must not idly hint of murder. If a writer hints of murder, there must be a murder to be discovered. Not only must there be a murder, but this, when discovered, must satisfactorily account for each and every one of those “dark hints” the writer had scattered throughout the tale, and the meaning of which had not been obvious at first, otherwise the tale will lack that consistency that is, according to Poe, the distinguishing feature of any artistically construed plot. In other words, the “internal evidence” of the crime must be such that the murder may be conclusively demonstrated. True artistry in this kind of writing, therefore, consists in fooling the reader into drawing false conclusions without resorting to lying or false clues. The clues must be made to point toward a false solution, and yet also support the true one.

Poe hints that he could keep a secret much better than Dickens had. A few months before his review of the then incomplete *Barnaby Rudge* came out, Poe had of course published “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the first *bona fide* detective story, which was, like Dickens’s novel, an

explained mystery. But I agree with Susan Amper, that Poe's real murder mysteries are not detective stories, but stories with mysteries the reader was challenged to find for himself.<sup>50</sup> The possibility of a story being designed so that the moment of revelation comes *after* a first reading is, as we have seen, clearly implied in Poe's review. The reader of *Barnaby Rudge* can "re-peruse" the novel, after he finished it, and see the "dark hints" light up. Poe, however, did it long before he read the whole novel, thus demonstrating he did not need to be told how it would end. What is there to prevent an enterprising and "imaginative" writer from conceiving a tale designed to let the reader arrive at the revelation himself, and confirming it through "re-perusal?"

Nothing. Poe had already done precisely that more than once, but no one had noticed. And so, Poe used *Barnaby Rudge* as a pretext to throw some more hints to his clever work of camouflage. In "Berenice," as we have seen, he had hidden a murder, just like Dickens did. There, he too had employed "dark hints" to simultaneously hint of the crime and conceal it. What is more, Poe used some of the exact same "dark hints" that his successor in crime would employ, namely, the apparent incongruous ravings of a character, and a ghost. With that in mind, let us re-peruse the following passage in the first review of *Barnaby Rudge*. "We may as well here observe," Poe candidly remarks, "that the reader should note carefully the ravings of Barnaby, which are not put into the mouth at random, as might be supposed, but are intended to convey indistinct glimmerings of the events to be evolved," and then comes a compliment that boomerangs right back at Poe, "and in this evident design of Mr. Dickens' his ideality is strongly evinced" (Poe, Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1841] 221 emphasis mine).

The "ideality" is manifested by the fact of the design being "evident." This is only apparently, or partially a compliment on Dickens, of course. Poe had detected his design before the novel had fairly begun, hence the basic premise of the novel, mystery, had not been effectually

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<sup>50</sup> In point of fact, the reader of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," as has already been noticed by many critics, is not in a condition to anticipate in full the solution provided by Dupin, because some crucial facts are concealed from him by the narrator, just as those same facts had been kept from the narrator by Dupin until he delivered his solution. Besides, the "murders" in the "Rue Morgue" are not, strictly speaking, "murders."

preserved. The implication is that the author could spare himself the trouble of plodding his way through the rest of it. In fact, Poe's reasoning leads to the conclusion that he had better leave it "unfinished," like Poe did his murder mysteries. Only then would the "dark hints," which we had demonstrated were enough for the "acute" reader, be "artistic." In fact, probably realizing that his design was not sufficiently obscured, and that the revelation he intended to make would no longer come as a surprise to his reader, Dickens was apparently forced to somewhat deviate from his original design.

By the same reasoning, Poe evinced not only ideality, but his awareness of his own ideality, in tales like "Berenice," and so, he is the one who truly deserves the compliment. In short, the review is itself a "dark hint" to Poe's "dark hints." "It would be difficult to impress," he continues, "upon the mind of a merely general reader how vast a degree of interest may be given to the story by such means;" that is, by darkly intimating a murder, "for in truth that interest, great as it may be made, will not be, strictly speaking, of a popular cast" (Poe, Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1841] 221). In other words, the exquisite artistry that went into the writing of a mystery could never be appreciated by the average reader. Therefore, in order to be read, the writer had to disguise his mystery, so that it could be generally appreciated. Dickens, Poe implies, had not understood this. At the same time, he had not managed his mystery artistically enough, and therefore also failed to produce a work that could be appreciated by a sophisticated reader who had a correct appreciation of the principles of art. Poe alone had struck a balance between the demands of the average public and the interests of art. Poe is basking in his triumph. Who could blame him?



## 7 – “Shadow of a Shade:” the Mystery of “Ligeia”

Poe had been intimating murder, or more precisely femicide, in his tales long before he wrote his review of *Barnaby Rudge*. However, the crimes of his narrators became increasingly obvious over the years. In “Berenice,” the murder of the narrator’s mother was very obscurely, one might say mystically, intimated conjointly by an unidentified ghost and by his re-enactment of the crime he had forgotten all about. In “Morella,” the narrator’s crime, the sacrifice of the daughter whom he forces to assume the place left vacant by her mother is no longer committed behind the scenes, in the dim past, but right before our eyes. Only a thick cloud of “mystical” misunderstanding veils it from our sight. In “The Black Cat,” of course, Poe went so far as to have a woman slaughtered on stage; still, he managed skillfully to conceal his narrator’s character.

In “Ligeia,” however, he had done an even more spectacular job of keeping a secret. There, we have not one, but two femicides: one covert, or hidden, and of which the narrator unwittingly offers a “phantasmagoric” reenactment, and another overt, which is actually obscured by the ghosts that haunt him. The strange ghostly drama in Rowena’s wake evidently evokes that in the wake of the femicide’s sister Eliza in Macnish’s *Confessions*, but Poe apparently omits the crime, which accounts for the wonders of his original, *the killing of the dark lady*, retaining only its consequence, her apparition in the wake of the fair. Thus, “Ligeia,” despite having its roots in the femicide story, has that “mystical” quality that is peculiar to Poe’s tales.

Indeed, there was nothing particularly “mystical” about Macnish’s tale, in the sense that the narrator himself has no trouble understanding why he is haunted. The ghost itself makes no secret of its purpose. “REPENT!,” it cries (Macnish, *Confessions* 17). In “Ligeia,” on the other hand, the ghosts and the reanimation are not explicitly assigned to any particular cause. It is as though Poe took the “wonders” in the second part of *Confessions*, and grafted them onto an otherwise entirely

different story, about a man who pines for a prodigiously learned dead wife that dabbled in mysticism. In reality, however, Poe once again used “mysticism” as a decoy.

The murder of the dark lady Ligeia by the narrator is not suppressed from Poe’s imitation, but merely concealed, very artistically, in plain sight. In other words, the crime is as inherent to the plot in “Ligeia” as it is in *Confessions*, but Poe recreated the original story in the form of a murder mystery, according to a formula he had himself created. The crime is the obvious consequence, then, of the events that lead to Ligeia’s death, and also the origin of the “ghosts” by which the narrator is subsequently haunted. The crime also adequately accounts for some bizarre sentiments expressed by her widower, which, though shockingly inadequate to the character of a bereaved lover, are perfectly in keeping with that of a femicide. Far from being indeterminate, both story and character are in fact clues to each other—that is, consistent with each other. And then, there is a wealth of “internal evidence,” the only kind of evidence suitable to be used by an “artist,” corroborating the crime.

By 1845, when he added “The Conqueror Worm” to the tale, and planted the note about “Ligeia” in the *New World*, Poe may have started to suspect he had made too good a job of hiding the obvious—the obvious, in this case, being femicide. This was achieved chiefly by the same device that Dickens would use in *Barnaby Rudge*, that of having a character—in Poe’s tale, the first-person narrator—conveying the impression that a ghost was about. The crucial clue to the mystery of “Ligeia” exactly meets the requirements Poe demands of a good “dark hint.” Though Poe ingeniously keeps his reader from perceiving its significance, once the solution to the riddle is discovered—by the same means employed by Poe in discovering the solution to Dickens’s mystery—the passage shines brightly, shedding a welcome light over all the gloomy business. Yet, at the same time, the passage containing the clue is well calculated to entertain the reader who does not possess the key. In fact, the reader will probably be so busy chasing the ghost of Ligeia that the key will not even be missed.

And yet, the key is there, as plain as daylight, in the very middle of the bridal chamber. Rowena, unnerved by the dread her husband was only too happy to inspire her and the “phantasmagoric influences” of the room where he kept her, wasted rapidly away during the first month of their marriage (Poe, “Ligeia” 323). On his part, however, the narrator is almost certain, though he is too cautious to assert anything, that terror did not kill her. He is apparently convinced that a third mysterious presence intruded on the couple’s privacy and finished Rowena off. The first intimation of this intrusion is a quaint “shadow” the narrator saw on the floor three nights before Rowena died.

Our decision of whether to accept the narrator’s supernatural “thesis” is tied up with our interpretation of this decisive “shadow.” Thus, according to each critic’s particular take on the question of the supernatural in “Ligeia,” the shadow has been regarded either as an external object, a positive manifestation of the spirit of Ligeia, triumphantly returning, by degrees, from the nether world to punish her rival, or as a mental picture, the first in a string of what appear to be hallucinations, what the narrator calls: “Wild visions, opium-engendered,” which “flitted, shadow-like before” him (Poe, “Ligeia” 326). According to a third, intermediate position, to which G. R. Thompson has given currency, it is impossible to decide whether the “shadow” is real or hallucination.

In point of fact, it is neither. The narrator’s description leaves no room to doubt that it is nothing *but* a shadow: “as I stepped beneath the light of the censer (...), I saw that there lay upon the golden carpet, in the very middle of the rich lustre thrown from the censer, a shadow—a faint, indefinite shadow of angelic aspect—such as might be fancied for the shadow of a shade” (Poe, “Ligeia” 325). The narrator suggests this is the ghost of his first wife Ligeia, and that it will proceed to kill Rowena out of jealousy—Rowena whom he was unquestionably, inexorably terrorising to death. This is, to be sure, the impression he conveys. But it is, as surely, a false impression. Poe has had us all chasing the ghost of Ligeia. While under his spell, we the readers have been led to debate

the ontological status of ghosts, generally considered, and, specifically, whether the author admitted the positive supernatural into his tale. Meanwhile, we never conceive the possibility of the shadow being *a shadow*.

Yet, the thing is clarity itself. Twice in the short passage transcribed above the narrator refers to the “censer” as a source of light. This is a “huge censer” that was suspended from a chain fastened to the “most central recess” of the “melancholy vaulting,” and from which issued a “continual succession of parti-colored fires” (Poe, “Ligeia” 321). Passing directly beneath its light, and looking down, it would be surprising indeed if the narrator did not see a shadow—*his* shadow. As for it being “indefinite,” it could hardly be otherwise, considering the “changing lights and shadows of the chamber” (Poe, “Berenice” 216). The phrase is taken from the wake scene in “Berenice,” but is an even fitter description of the scenario in Ligeia’s room, where “the writhing of the parti-colored fires in the censer overhead” was everywhere reflected by the cloth of gold covered with “jetty” arabesques, which an artificial wind kept constantly in motion.

Indeed, however deceptive appearances may have been in the room, Poe makes it absolutely clear that there is nothing unexpected, or even hard to explain, about that shadow. Four nights later, the narrator “sat alone” by Rowena’s corpse: “My eyes then fell, as I called to mind the circumstances of a former night, to the spot beneath the glare of the censer where I had seen the faint traces of the shadow. It was there, however, no longer; and breathing with greater freedom, I turned my glances to the pallid and rigid figure upon the bed” (Poe, “Ligeia” 326). No one but a very deluded person would have dreamed of being surprised by this. The shadow was there when, and only when his body passed under the censer. Now that he was seated in one of the “ottomans,” instead of standing beneath the censer, he did not see the shadow. This was natural enough, there being no one else in the room but him and the invalid, and then dead Rowena. At the time, she was in her bed—in fact, she never once left her bed during the whole procedures. At the time, then, there was *no body* between the source of light and the carpet. For the second time in a few lines the

narrator is perplexed by seeing exactly what one would expect him to see: first a shadow, and then no shadow.

An interesting article in Henry Nelson Coleridge's *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge* warns against precisely the sort of confusion Poe's narrator makes. The definition of a "vulgar ghost," the editor recalls hearing his uncle say, "is visibility without tangibility; which is also the definition of a shadow. Therefore, a vulgar ghost and a shadow would be the same thing; because two different things cannot properly have the same definition" (1:15). However, Coleridge thought the definition absurd: "Unless there be an external substance, the bodily eye cannot see it; therefore, in all such cases, that which is supposed to be seen is, in fact, *not* seen, but is an image of the brain," that is, an hallucination; "if," however, "the vulgar ghost be really a shadow, there must be some substance of which it is the shadow. These visible and intangible shadows, without substances to cause them, are absurd" (1:15-16). Evidently, Poe's narrator could have used Coleridge's advice, of which Poe was probably well aware.<sup>51</sup>

The recognition, by the reader, of the obvious fact that there is no mystery to the shadow on which the whole story pivots causes a revolution in its interpretation—that is, the reader of the tale must revise the assumptions on which his or her initial interpretation of the tale had been based. This highlights some crucial aspects about the very nature of reading. While we read, we necessarily establish working hypotheses about what is going on in the tale, drawing inferences as we go along. The mystery story is designed in such a way that we are forced to revise such inferences in light of further revelations—this is at the root of what is usually termed suspense. Stories involving suspense exploit the fundamental inferential process that is inherent to reading, thereby bringing that process into visibility. In this sense, the mystery story may in fact be conceived as an experimental demonstration of the existence of that process, in which the reader conducts an experiment the protocol of which is the text itself. As Susan Amper remarks, though in

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<sup>51</sup> Coleridge was a spiritualist. However, he sought to separate the "vulgar ghosts," of popular superstition, which according to him were either illusions or delusions, from what he regarded as true spiritual entities.

tales like “Ligeia” two competing interpretations are being elicited, “we need not view the stories as seeking to elicit different reactions from different readers: disparate reactions are typically experienced within a single reader,” making for what she styles a “schizophrenic reaction” (“Masters of Deceit” 107-8). More precisely, the reader cannot quite decide if the tale is to be taken seriously or not. Most modern scholarship has assumed, with Thompson, that Poe intended to keep the reader permanently in that state.

But this assumption falls to the ground once we realise the “shadow” has a simple and straightforward solution. In her article on “The Black Cat,” Susan Amper said that the solution to that tale’s mystery is “the ideal detective story solution: one that is simplicity itself in explaining all the facts, yet so elusive it has taken a century and a half to be discovered” (“Masters of Deceit” 38).<sup>52</sup> The same thing might be said of the solution of the mystery of the “shadow” in “Ligeia,” which is the root of all the mysteries in the tale. When found, the solution is irrefusable, and brings about the same kind of revolutionary reinterpretation that is produced, in Poe’s detective stories, by Dupin’s explanations.

Like all revolutions, it is bound to be met with some resistance from the status quo. One will even doubt one’s own senses, if the reader allows me the metaphor, before one relinquishes all that one had previously been taking for granted, including those broad critical assumptions that underlie almost every critical reading of Poe’s work ever made. And yet, the shadow cannot be dismissed. It is not a possibility. It is an actuality—or as nearly an actuality as can be conceived in fiction. Before it, our initial assessment of the story must be radically revised—which is what anagnorisis is all about, of course. In a sense, of all the “tricks” Poe played on the public, this may be the best expression of what Pollin termed Poe’s “frank disdain for the literary culture or perceptiveness of his reading public” (*Discoveries* 26).

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<sup>52</sup> Amper’s remark is in reference to the solution of “The Black Cat.” In section 4 of the first chapter of this dissertation, which is dedicated to that tale, I have explained why I do not agree with some aspects of the solution she presents for the mystery of that tale. However, as I have also stated before, I fully subscribe the view that these tales are mysteries, that is, that the existence of a solution which is inherent to the text is fully intimated to the reader.

The crisis attendant on this revolution has far-reaching consequences that are not limited to the reading of the tale but extend to our understanding of reading itself. Baudelaire was perhaps the first, but by no means the only one of Poe's readers to feel he was being duped. This sneaking suspicion lurks behind the general feeling of vague uneasiness before his work that prompts most critics to make only the vaguest statements about his plots. To validate his own practice as a poet, Baudelaire insisted that Poe's unearthly visions of a supernal truth, or rather, those of his narrators, were thoroughly serious, and did not partake of the farcical quality of what he regarded as his lighter fiction, among which he included his more obvious hoaxes. Thus, Baudelaire originated the idea of a double Poe, which has informed most Poe scholarship to this day. Poe had, Baudelaire writes, "le plus ingénieusement fabriqué les *canards* les plus flatteurs pour l'orgueil de l'*homme moderne*," and "fut toujours grand, non seulement dans ses conceptions nobles, mais encore comme farceur," passionately adding: "Car il ne fut jamais dupe!" (Baudelaire, "Notes Nouvelles" 622).

In this statement, taken from Baudelaire's preface to the second of his two volumes of translations of Poe's tales (1857), it appears to me that the French writer is evidently exorcising an anxiety concerning Poe's sincerity. In the previous "Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses Œuvres" (1856), the preface to the first volume of Baudelaire's translations from Poe, the French poet had already developed his theory that the tone of Poe's "serious" fiction constituted evidence of sincerity:

Sa solennité surprend et tient l'esprit en éveil. On sent tout d'abord qu'il s'agit de quelque chose de grave. Et lentement, peu à peu, se déroule une histoire dont tout l'intérêt repose sur une imperceptible déviation de l'intellect, sur une hypothèse audacieuse, sur un dosage imprudent de la nature dans l'amalgame des facultés. Le lecteur, lié par le vertige, est contraint de suivre l'auteur dans ses entraînantes déductions. (616)

This passage perfectly captures Baudelaire's sense of the skill with which Poe took control of his reader's reactions. Yet, his point is incompatible with Poe's theory of "earnestness." For what

Baudelaire here calls “solennité” is precisely that “earnestness” in expressing his narrators’s opinions on which Poe’s power of “simulation” depended, and which the French poet identifies with sincerity: “L’ardeur même avec laquelle il se jette dans le grotesque pour l’amour du grotesque et dans l’horrible pour l’amour de l’horrible me sert à vérifier la sincérité de son oeuvre et l’accord de l’homme avec le poète” (Baudelaire, “Edgar Poe” 617). Underlying this assertion is a complete identification of Poe with the “earnest” narrator of the tales about dead women, which is made explicit later in the same article:

Les personnages de Poe, ou plutôt le personnage de Poe, l’homme aux facultés suraiguës, l’homme aux nerfs relâchés, l’homme dont la volonté ardente et patiente jette un défi aux difficultés, celui dont le regard est tendu avec la roideur d’une épée sur des objets qui grandissent à mesure qu’il les regard—c’est Poe lui-même. —Et ses femmes, toutes lumineuses et malades, mourant de maux bizarres et parlant avec une voix qui ressemble à une musique, c’est encore lui; ou du moins, par leurs aspirations étranges, par leur savoir, par leur mélancolie inguérissable, elles participent fortement de la nature de leur créateur. (Baudelaire, “Edgar Poe” 617-18)

Baudelaire thus clearly projected his understanding of poetry as the embodiment of indefinite visions on Poe, whose earliest poetry, according to him, had “l’accent extra-terrestre,” and whose whole work, as a whole, he regarded as “extra ou suprahumaine” (“Edgar Poe” 601, 603). His conception of the double Poe is predicated on the polar opposition between the materialism, represented by democratic America, and the spirituality of the poet, as conceived by Baudelaire. “L’activité matérielle, exagérée jusqu’aux proportions d’une manie nationale, laisse dans les esprits bien peu de place pour les choses qui ne sont pas de la terre;” in the quest for which he supposed Poe was fully and sincerely engaged: “Il ne croyait qu’à l’immuable, à l’éternel, au *self same*” (597-98).



Therefore, when Baudelaire later writes that Poe was never a dupe, he evidently means to say that he himself had not been duped. In other words, he justifies his own perception that Poe was not simulating the opinions of his solemn narrator; that he really had faith in the latter's "transcendental" methods. Poe, of course, had also written tales that evinced "une aptitude des plus remarquables pour les sciences physiques et mathématiques. (...) Mais j'ai des raisons de croire que ce n'est pas à cet ordre de compositions qu'il attachait le plus d'importance, et que (...) il n'était pas loin de les considérer comme de *faciles* jongleries, comparativement aux ouvrages de pure imagination," which Baudelaire regarded as the manifestation of a sincere striving after those visions of ideal beauty that he valued above all (Baudelaire, "Edgar Poe" 600).

The character of the double Poe, the no-nonsense "farceur" and the reckless visionary, is one of the greatest creations of Baudelaire's genius. But his creation, like the creations of all great writers, should be regarded as the embodiment of his conception of literature. They should not be regarded, of course, as a document of Poe's intentions. Baudelaire's articles on Poe are literary testaments of their author. They tell us how he would like to be read—just as Poe's articles on others were his way of telling us how he wished to be read. Yet, just as Poe's narrators had captured the imagination of his readers, so Baudelaire's fascinating recreation of Poe captured the imagination of many critics, who, sometimes unaware of Baudelaire's influence, thought of Poe as a visionary, and became convinced, even against the evidence of his own works, that the object of his fiction was to impart some indefinite vision of an ungraspable truth. In order to accommodate this preestablished image of Poe, they had to disregard the fundamental distinction between "earnestness" and "sincerity" that was central to his criticism.

This understanding of Poe's character led to the conviction that his plots were indefinite—or rather, had to be indefinite—, and this in turn led to the habit of attributing to Poe nothing but the vaguest of intentions. But even noncommittalism, which has saved many a critic from similar scrapes, is of no avail in this particular case. G. R. Thompson's, for example, maintained that a

“realistic psychological explanation” is *as* valid as the supernaturalistic reading, and that it is impossible to know for certain what actually happens in the tale (*Poe’s Fiction* 77). For Thompson, indeed, the extraordinary events in the second part of “Ligeia” may be only in the narrator’s head: “it is clear that we do not know anything the narrator has told us is ‘real,’ the whole tale and its structures may be a fabrication of the completely deranged mind of the narrator” (97). But, as we have seen, the supernatural “thesis” of the narrator is actually disproven. And the same clues that enable the reader to reject his explanations also constitute incontrovertible evidence that the wonders in Rowena’s room were not *entirely* in the narrator’s head, or, in other words, that a literal naturalistic interpretation of the tale is possible.

Thompson further argued that “Poe’s Gothic tale developed from a satiric mode into an ironic philosophical concern;” in it, “the form itself, even the plot, approaches an absurd hoax on the character—just as existence may be God’s hoax on man” (*Poe’s Fiction* xii). Unlike regular “satirical” hoaxes, that half-heartedly convey a false impression, these “absurd” cosmical hoaxes were supposedly designed to show the absolute futility of all human pretensions to knowledge. Thus, according to Thompson, in “Ligeia” nothing is certain: “we are led, first, into the world of supernatural horror, and then out of that world into a world of mental horror, and then, out of that purely mental world into a limbo region of ambiguity where we cannot be sure what did or did not take place” (104).

Although recognising the basic unreliability of the narrator, therefore, Thompson argues that he cannot be *proven* wrong, and, consequently, that his cluelessness was intended as a figuration of the plight of humans in an absurd world:

it is not my intention to discredit all those readers who have responded seriously to the sinister, occult element in Poe. Rather, I seek to show other levels of meaning in addition to a surface level of the occult, arguing that a superficially literalist approach to Poe’s dark tales in terms of the occult obscures the true complexity of his

achievement. It is not so much that previous critics have been wrong, as it is that their readings of Poe's tales have been limited. (Thompson, *Poe's Fiction* xii)

Again, when it comes to the interpretation of "Ligeia," there simply is no "right" and "wrong." Thompson is here talking of the most basic sense of the word interpretation: the determination of what really happens in the tale. This, he argues, cannot be established with any degree of certainty, therefore, all guesses are equally valid. But, since supernaturalistic readings of the tale are based on the narrator's interpretations of what goes on in Rowena's room, and these interpretations are demonstrably false, Thompson's theory of the ambiguity of the tale is itself false. Thus, Poe duped not only the "not-so-acute reader," but even the most trained eyes. The only gracious thing to do is to smile at our own ingenuousness—the ingenuousness, that is, of the reader, which is as helpless before the skilled artisan of fiction as Poe claimed. Poe was clearly not trying to lead us into contemplating the folly of reason, as Thompson supposes. The moral of the joke he makes at our expense—at the expense of all his readers—is, in fact, quite the opposite of what Thompson supposed it to be.

Once detected, Poe's hoax is designed to make the reader realise just how deliberately, how cynically, how cleverly, the author has charmed us into *not thinking*. This in turn forces us to question those hasty assumptions we make while reading, which usually go unnoticed, and without which, in fact, as Michael Riffaterre has argued, reading would not be possible. According to this critic, the "analysis" of literature, which he distinguishes from traditional literary studies, consisted in the explanation of these assumptions, which invariably tend toward generalisation: "Le texte est toujours unique en son genre. Et cette *unicité* est, me semble-t-il, la définition la plus simple que nous puissions donner de la literalité" ("L'Explication" 8).

This "uniqueness," however, meets what Riffaterre calls "la résistance naturelle du lecteur au texte: le lecteur résiste de toutes les forces de son humeur personnelle, de ses tabous, de ses habitudes. Il résiste en rationalisant; rationalisation qui ramène ce qu'on trouve d'étrange dans le

texte au connu, au familier” (“L’Explication” 8). The analysis of literature would consist in: “la description des composantes de l’énoncé qui provoquent des rationalisations” and the verification of the validity of each rationalization: “La confirmer consistera à montrer que les mots l’imposent. L’infirmier, à montrer que les mots ne l’imposent pas. Qu’elle soit une erreur sur le plan des choses importe peu, si cette erreur est réalité sur le plan de la représentation” (9).

Riffaterre used a description in Rabelais to demonstrate that the reader was compelled by an irresistible impulse to assume the “reference” of any description, even when, as was demonstrably the case, an object could not be conceived that fitted that description—which was therefore, strictly speaking, not a description, but a pseudo-description. Riffaterre showed that even professional commentators formed a mental picture of the impossible giant “described” in the passage under analysis, ironing out the strangeness from the text to accommodate it.

In Poe’s tale, however, the rationalisation works in an opposite direction, preventing the reader from recognizing that the phenomenon the narrator describes is commonplace, and perfectly agrees with the accumulated experience of mankind, as an empiricist would say. This also applies to the rest of the tale which turns out to be a covert, but otherwise perfect example of the explained supernatural of Ann Radcliffe. Poe’s text, that is, invites the reader to reconcile its strangeness to what he knows, in this case, to a general understanding of Romanticism which entails the idea of the supernatural.

This is, I think, a perfect, but also, in a sense, an unexpected illustration of Riffaterre’s concept of rationalisation: “le propre de l’expérience littéraire, c’est d’être un dépaysement, un exercice d’aliénation, un bouleversement de nos pensées, de nos perceptions, de nos expressions habituelles. Tel est le sens de la réplique d’André Breton à Paul Valéry: ‘Le poème doit être une débâcle de l’intellect. Il ne peut être autre chose’” (“L’Explication” 8). This is, of course, the kind of statement about literature that can ultimately be traced to Baudelaire, who in turn projected his conception of poetic intuition on Poe. Poe, however, as it turns out, was suggesting, precisely, that

this sort of Romantic creed could cause alienation, even from one's own perception. The only difference between Poe's and Radcliffe's version of the explained supernatural is that his reader is never *told* that the protagonist misconstrues what he sees.

But let us return to Rowena's room and attempt to trace the implications of our discovery for the other mysteries of the tale. The shadow is only the beginning. The dense mist that surrounds the "story" suddenly vanishes before the "quadruple brilliancy" of Poe's "dark hints," to use the vocabulary he himself employs in the review of *Barnaby Rudge*. The ghost that the narrator has us chase did not kill Rowena—he did. There never was anyone else. It was *always* him. The ghost is his cover. If it had not been for the "ghost," the narrator *would have* killed Rowena—that much, at least, was always perfectly clear. Once this "ghost" vanishes, or more precisely, is resolved into his "shadow," the crime appears, vividly and clearly before us. He killed Rowena, like the madman in Dickens's tale, without ever laying a hand on her. Indeed, nothing could be more obvious than that he deliberately terrorised her to death. After all, this is a man who marries a woman he hates for the sole purpose of confining her in a "phantasmagoria."<sup>53</sup>

This in turn leads us to the equally decisive realisation that the "dark hints" in Rowena's room, which actually prevented us from recognising what the narrator had done, are not clues to her

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53 The story of Rowena, specifically, reminds one of another of Perrault's fairy tales, "Griselidis." The male protagonist of the tale—which, like Poe's, is named after a woman—utterly despises women. This prince vowed never to marry, and for the following reasons: "Dans la diversité des routes qu'elles tiennent, / Il n'est qu'une chose où je voi / Qu'enfin toutes elles [women, he means] conviennent, / C'est de vouloir donner la loi" (Perrault, *Contes* 20).

This the prince cannot accept: "Or je suis convaincu que dans le mariage / On ne peut jamais vivre heureux, / Quand on y commande tous deux" (Perrault, *Contes* 20). And so, he describes to his subjects the ideal woman who has everything he required of a wife, convinced that no such woman existed in reality: "Si donc vous souhaitez que'à l'hymen je m'engage, / Cherchez une jeune Beauté / (...) qui n'ait point de volonté" (20).

He finds just what he desired, of course, when he least expected. But, after he marries, he realises that he cannot be sure of his wife's "virtue" unless he tests it: "Pour guérir les chagrins dont son âme est atteinte, / Il la suit, il l'observe, il l'aime troubler / Par les ennuis de la contrainte, / Par les alarmes de la crainte" (Perrault, *Contes* 32). Like the narrator of "Ligeia," then, the prince loves to be feared by his passive wife; and he also likes to subject her to "Les traitements les plus insupportables;" he even locks her up in a place that corresponds to the description of the "bridal chamber" in "Ligeia:" "Dans son Palais il la tient resserrée, / Loin de tous les plaisirs qui naissent à la Cour, / Et dans sa chambre, où seule elle vit retirée, / A peine il laisse entrer le jour" (33). This tell-tale detail shows us that Rowena's room was equally unwholesome: "the sole window—an unbroken sheet of unbroken glass from Venice—a single pane, and tinted of a leaden hue, so that the rays of either the sun or moon, passing through it, fell with a ghastly lustre on the objects within" (Poe, "Ligeia" 321).

The character of the decoration is, therefore, very similar, and so is the character of the woman-hating decorators.

death, as has always been supposed even by the few who realised the narrator was a killer, but to the murder of her predecessor. The “shadow” is the first and decisive hint which contributes to implant the belief that Ligeia was about. Indeed, metonymy provides a strong inducement to identify the “shadow” of “angelic aspect” with Ligeia, for, in the first part of the narrative—which is so vague as almost not to deserve that name—the narrator told us she “came and departed as a shadow” (Poe, “Ligeia” 311). There is, however, another, seldom noticed, shadowy, angelic, third presence in his account of the rise and fall of Ligeia. At first, however, the reader does not pay much mind to this other shadow, which he is bound to regard as an allegorical figure. I am speaking of the Great Shadow that kills Ligeia. “Words are impotent to convey any just idea of the fierceness with which she wrestled with the Shadow” (317).

While the wife wrestled with this solemnly capitalised “Shadow,” her husband “would have soothed,” he “would have reasoned,” but did neither; instead, he “groaned in anguish at the pitiable spectacle” of her struggle for life (Poe, “Ligeia” 317). Is this not what any loving husband thus circumstanced would be expected to do? I should hardly think so. Yet, the narrator, tacitly pleading his reader’s sympathy, certainly speaks as if this was all perfectly natural. But what does he mean by “pitiable spectacle?” “There had been much in her stern nature to impress me with the belief that, to her, death would have come without its terrors—but not so” (316-17). How unphilosophical of her.<sup>54</sup> At the time, the disgust for his wife’s vain, as he calls it, resistance to the catastrophe he thought was inevitable evidently outweighed his sorrow.

In fact, at the time, the narrator betrayed no sign of sorrow. He was already perfectly reconciled with her death even before it happened. After some years of marriage, the narrator had remarked a “change” in Ligeia. “I saw that she must die,” he recalls, “and I struggled desperately in spirit with the grim Azrael” (Poe, “Ligeia” 316). Azrael is, of course, the Muslim angel of death—another name for the Shadow (with a capital S). But what does the narrator mean by saying he

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<sup>54</sup> Thompson, completely taken in by the narrator’s rhetoric, echoes his disappointment: “Ligeia seems to love life itself without any concern for the ultimate principles of philosophy and ethics which her studies of transcendentalism would suggest were prominent traits in her” (*Poe’s Fiction*, 86).

“struggled”—and desperately—with it “in spirit?” The next sentence can help to answer that question: “And the struggles of the passionate wife were, to my astonishment, even more energetic than my own” (317).

The narrator describes Ligeia’s agony as a contest of strength between husband and wife, mediated by the Shadow/Angel. The narrator’s struggle, however, was internal, which would be a very good allegory for the psychological process of decision-making—the decision being, in this case, that of killing Ligeia. But, in all fairness, the narrator, unlike Ligeia, did not put much of a fight: he had already “seen” that she would have to die. However, this would remain no more than a suspicion were it not for the narrator’s strange inability to see clearly in Rowena’s room, which leads him unwittingly to reveal that *he* is the “shadow” that killed Ligeia—for it is Ligeia, not Rowena, who he “sees” dying, once again, during what he calls the “drama of revivification” in Rowena’s room (Poe, “Ligeia” 328). It was him all along.<sup>55</sup>

This is perfectly consistent, incidentally, with the indeterminateness of his words on that latter occasion. Again, once we find the key to the mystery, each new reading reveals some hitherto unnoticed clue. When he looked for the shadow under the censer, as we have seen, he “called to mind the circumstances of a former night.” We assume he is talking about *the* night when he had seen his own shadow under the censer. But he leaves room for doubt. Everything suggests he was thinking, as was his wont, about Ligeia—he was *always* thinking about her. Indeed, he admits that at the sight of the “enshrouded” Rowena “rushed upon me a thousand memories of Ligeia—and then came back upon my heart, with the turbulent violence of a flood, the whole of that unutterable wo with which I had regarded *her* thus enshrouded;” and again, that “with a bosom full of bitter thoughts of the one and only supremely beloved, I remained gazing upon the body of Rowena” (Poe, “Ligeia” 326). He could not make it any clearer that he was thinking not of *the* night when Rowena’s condition worsened, as we had first assumed, but of the night in which he had watched by

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55 Similarly, Egæus mentioned the “destroyer” of the “victim” that was not Berenice without realizing that he was talking of himself.

Ligeia's similarly "enshrouded" body. And, indeed, it was her, not Rowena, that he "saw" coming back to life.

We can no longer ignore the obvious inference to be drawn from all this. At the sight of the "enshrouded" body of his second wife, the narrator recalls how he had seen his first wife "thus enshrouded" coming back to life after he had given *her* the "drops"—for it was to her that he had administered the "drops" he had *not* given Rowena. More precisely, his imagination presents the scene to him with such vividness that he confuses it with reality. Like Egæus did in the original version of "Berenice," then, the narrator of "Ligeia" is projecting the reminiscences of the crime that haunts him on the wake of his new victim. Ironically, he himself cannot understand that the "ghosts" of which he speaks are "dark hints" that reveal to the reader what he intended to conceal: his involvement in Ligeia's death. Thus, he resumes, among the "shadows," the role he had performed in the drama of Ligeia's death, in a sort of waking dream, and as though he were sleepwalking.

This tale, however, differs in many important respects from "Berenice." The narrator ostensibly omits from his description of Ligeia's agony details he himself admits were significant, most notably certain words she then told him. This suggests that, unlike Egæus, he was aware that he had killed before, but wanted to conceal the fact, either from fear of being apprehended, superstitious terror, or both—shame seems quite out of the question. But he saw no reason to deprive the reader from a full account of all he thinks he saw and heard in Rowena's room, or rather of his interpretation of what he saw and heard, both before and after her death. And this because he never realised he was reliving his first crime in imagination.

The narrator had *really* seen the "enshrouded" Ligeia come back to life—this is one of the things he chooses not to tell us. He never did see, of course, *Rowena* come back to life. At a given point, however, he believed she might. And this for an obvious reason. He believed she had taken the same "drops" he had given Ligeia: and *she* did not *stay* dead. For all his visions are connected



with Ligeia's death. He keeps coming back, in fancy, to that memorable occasion, and relives the whole dreadful scene, complete with all the details he had omitted. He admits, indeed, he had been filled with thoughts of Ligeia long before Rowena's wake, and even before the "drops" appeared. This confusion between past and present had been going on ever since he brought Rowena to his abbey: "My memory flew back, (oh, with what intensity of regret!) to Ligeia, the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed. I revelled in recollections of her purity, of her wisdom, of her lofty, her ethereal nature, of her passionate, her idolatrous love" (Poe, "Ligeia" 323).

The narrator, then, did not *see* the "drops" fall into Rowena's wine—he *dreamed* about the "drops" that had fallen into Ligeia's. Still, he really believes that they were the cause of the former's death: "I cannot conceal from my own perception that, immediately subsequent to the fall of the ruby-drops, a rapid change for the worse took place in the disorder of my wife" ("Ligeia" 326). Although he later came to integrate both the "shadow" and the "drops" into a supernatural narrative, at the time he felt very differently about them. Indeed, the contrast in the way he presents these two "facts" to the reader is highly significant. There is no hesitation in his statement about the latter: "I saw that there lay upon the carpet (...) a shadow" (Poe, "Ligeia" 325). He is certain, therefore, that the "shadow" was there. As we have seen, it must have been. It is an entirely different matter with the "drops:" "I saw, or may have dreamed that I saw, fall within the goblet, as if from some invisible spring in the atmosphere of the room, three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid. If this I saw—not so Rowena" (325 emphasis mine). Just as surely as he saw the "shadow," then, he *did not* see the drops, but dreamed them. For the fall of the drops was not merely impossible—it felt *unreal* even to the narrator. The supreme irony in all this is that the only thing he is certain of having *seen*, and which he does not distort, his shadow, should prove the decisive clue that ultimately delivers him to the reader. Indeed, the literal meaning of his statements is always compatible with a natural explanation.

Some critics thought that the “drops” were poison. This is clearly suggested by the narrator—at least at first. However, the supposedly supernatural events that ensue, as well as the mysterious shadow that precedes it, suggest that the drops were a sign of Ligeia’s presence. This Mabbott supposed to be the correct interpretation: “Such good a critic as Vincent Buranelli (...) supposed the drops to be poison, but they are rather a primary corporeal form attained by Ligeia’s spirit; and in themselves the elixir of life” (*Tales* 1:334n31). I think neither was precisely right. The drops evidently constitute a covert allusion to *The Monk*. For the “drops” in “Ligeia” and those employed by the monk in Matthew Lewis’s novel apparently have the same virtues: the person who takes them apparently dies, but then comes back to life. I have already mentioned how the learned Matilda suggested to Ambrosio that he drugged the blonde and virtuous Antonia, so she might be buried in the monastery’s crypt. “She will then be,” Matilda had told him, “absolutely in your power: She will find all resistance unavailing, and necessity will compel her to receive you in her arms” (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 330). Following his accomplice’s instructions, the monk filled “his phial” with an unspecified “soporific liquor” and proceeded to his new love’s quarters (330). Antonia was then recovering from the shock occasioned by the visit of the ghost of her mother Elvira, who had frightened her almost to death. The unscrupulous monk had done away with Elvira himself (who as it turns out was also his own long-lost mother) after she had discovered he was making sexual advances on Antonia, to prevent his sexual exploits from being known... it is a long and complicated story. Suffice it to say, that Ambrosio found her more or less in the same position in which Rowena was placed in the night of the “drops.”

While the physician “was employed in questioning her Patient,” Ambrosio stealthily “moved towards the Table, on which stood Antonia’s medicine,” “drew out the fatal Phial, and let a few drops fall into the medicine” (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 332). This wine had been prescribed to Antonia by her physician—Rowena’s physicians, of course, had prescribed the same medicine for her nervous complaints. Soon, the maid Flora, suspecting nothing, served Antonia a cup of the spiked

beverage. After that, her condition, like Rowena's, took a turn for the worse, and she was prematurely pronounced dead later that same night—only to revive in the tomb about twenty-four hours later. The “drops” the narrator thinks he may have seen in Rowena's room apparently had the same effect. But only apparently. Poe could not make it clearer that they were *not* there.

Indeed, the narrator was not even close to the “goblet” when he “dreamed” them. But then, he also did *not* see the “enshrouded” Rowena come back to life; he “saw,” *or may have dreamed that he saw*, Ligeia coming back to life. For we have already established that her apparition is the probable effect of the “phantasmagoria” on the narrator's mind. Thus, we are inexorably led to the conclusion that both the “drops” and the reanimation are reminiscences from his past. This perfectly accounts, incidentally, for the narrator's conviction that Ligeia was immortal.

For the narrator of “Ligeia” was evidently every bit as superstitious and ignorant as Ambrosio—compared to their super-learned female guides, at least, they are both positively clueless. The monk only knew that the inanimate Antonia was not, and had never really been gone, because “Matilda had taught him the means of ascertaining, that life was not extinct forever” (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 336). In “Ligeia,” however, the protagonist's guide and his victim become one: when he kills Ligeia, therefore, the narrator also destroys his chances of ever making sense of her reanimation, or the “drops.” Indeed, in “Ligeia,” the narrator's superstition itself indicates that he was intimately convinced she had *really* risen from the dead.

When he thought that Rowena was coming back to life, he surmised she had been prematurely buried because he had caused Ligeia to be prematurely buried by mixing Ambrosio's fateful “soporific” into her wine—the same liquid he believed he had later miraculously fallen into Rowena's wine. But he never could bring himself to believe that Ligeia was only sleeping. She appeared dead to him. And he prepared a phantasmagoric confirmation of this belief in Rowena's room. When he saw, as he thought, that it was the Lady Ligeia that was coming back to life, he remarked that, each time, she recovered from “a sterner and apparently more irredeemable death”

(Poe, "Ligeia" 328). The idea that death varies in degree, indeed, is very peculiar. It suggests, of course, that he could not accurately identify death—as we will see in the next chapter, he had indeed only a very imperfect understanding of such matters.

As I said, in Rowena's room the narrator recollected, with great vividness, what had happened to Ligeia—is this not what he had been telling us all along? Like Antonia, she had been taken for dead, "enshrouded," and entombed. Later, in her tomb, the narrator awaited her reanimation. This explains why Rowena's room was decorated like a crypt—everything in that room reminded her husband of the final scenes of Ligeia's life, or more precisely, carried him back to that time. When his victim—I mean Ligeia—had begun to stir, he had "struggled" with her—like Ambrosio had done. This is the "struggle" he obscurely intimates in his narrative of her death, and of which the "ghostly" drama in Rowena's room is evidently a recapitulation. Remember "how each agony" of Ligeia-Rowena "wore the aspect of a struggle with some invisible foe" (Poe, "Ligeia" 29)? The woman he "saw" struggling with this "foe," of course, was not Rowena—but Ligeia. Likewise, the "invisible foe" who struggled with Ligeia while the narrator attempted to reanimate Rowena was, of course, the "Great Shadow," a.k.a., the man himself. Both were "ghosts" from the past.

This indicates that the narrator had struggled long and hard with the reanimated Ligeia, which gives a new meaning to his remark that he had been surprised to find that the "struggles of the passionate wife were (...) even more energetic than my own" (Poe, "Ligeia" 316). He had before admitted, of course, that she was fighting for her life, and also, indirectly, that he was "struggling" to break her resistance. Apparently, he had more than once left her for dead. This circumstance added to his conviction that she would keep on returning.

The parallel with *The Monk* further indicates that the primary object of this "struggle" was probably the same in both cases, that is, to force the "dead-alive" woman into sexual submission. In both cases, the "struggle" ended with the death of the woman. Ligeia was hard to subdue, but man

eventually prevailed, or as he put it in an early version of the tale (Mabbott's text A): "The giant *will* succumbed to a power more stern" (Poe, "Ligeia" 318n).<sup>56</sup> This sentence is but too clear an intimation of rape. But, while in *The Monk* rape and murder succeeded each other, in "Ligeia" it appears to be the other way around. This is indicated by the narrator's sly statement that he had been "impressed" with Ligeia's love "in death only" (317). The statement also clearly intimates, of course, that she had not "loved" him before, which, as I have already remarked, provides him with a motive for murder. In addition, it also provides him with a motive for plotting her premature burial, as the monk had done.

These events haunted the narrator ever since—and this is the solution of the mystery. That is, this satisfactorily explains all the narrator's peculiar behavior in the second part of the tale. He had been so pleased with Ligeia "in death" that he became obsessed with reliving the experience. He procured himself a new wife, therefore, so that he might once again indulge both his sadistic urges and the taste for dead women he had imbibed—that he had a taste for dead women, I think, was obvious from the start. Accordingly, he arranged matters so that he would not be disturbed while he "performed," as William the femicide put it, Rowena's wake—indeed, the fact that he was not disturbed during the whole ghastly scene proves that he had been very careful. At the same time, however, he was also obsessed with the idea that Ligeia might not be "irredeemably" dead. In fact, like the original femicide and Ambrosio the monk, he was haunted by his deed, but could not acknowledge his guilt. When he finally found himself alone with Rowena's corpse, then, the ghost of his first victim—or rather, the ghost of his first crime itself, came back and turned his pleasure into horror.

Thus, even after the narrator's crimes are revealed, "Ligeia" continues not to conform to strict notions of didacticism, which would require the criminal to be exposed and punished. The

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<sup>56</sup> See note 28. If Rowena is reminiscent of Griselidis, the woman with "no will" in Perrault's fable, Ligeia is quite the opposite. According to her husband, she is *all* will. This uncovers his motive for killing her. Through a sort of poetic justice, however, Poe also makes her *will* one of the main sources of the narrator's superstition. That is, her "giant will," on a man that shares the superstition of the femicide, results inevitably in a belief that she was a witch. I will develop all these ideas below.

same could be said of Macnish's *Confessions*, but, unlike Poe's narrator, the femicide is detected, although ultimately not convicted, and universally recognised as a murderer. In this sense, "Ligeia" is even farther removed from any idea of retribution. Not only does the criminal there survive to tell his tale, he lives to kill again. Worse of all, he fools his readers much more effectively than William could. The fact that such a repulsive character is permitted to evade punishment, however, conveys a moral, but not the kind of reassuring faith that "crime does not pay" that we get from fables—either the old-fashioned fables of Perrault, or their modern counterparts, television police-procedurals. In fact, the implied moral of the hidden story is, I think, that one should never trust men like Ligeia's husband.

## 8 – The Rhetoric of Femicide

Since the author chose not to be represented by a third-person narrator, Poe's covert-femicide could not be detected unless he incriminated himself, but the writer would have to be very discreet about it, of course, otherwise he would not be "covert" at all, but merely another "unexecuted" femicide. Likewise, this narrator would also have to convey the false impression himself, while also providing clues by which the reader would be allowed to perceive that it was a false impression. Considering they were the reader's only form of access to the "story," Poe could not afford to put downright lies into their mouths, because this would jeopardise the consistency of the text—without which murder would never out.

Susan Amper, one of only three scholars that seriously accused Ligeia's widower of killing her (the others are Donald Koster and Terrence Matheson), attributed all the ambiguity in the tale to "weasel wording," that is, "the practice of devising statements that leave a false impression, but are literally true" (Amper, "Masters of Deceit" 24). But this presupposes a deliberate intention on the speaker's part to deceive. I agree that Poe frequently employed this device throughout his work, notably in his criticism. However, it appears to me that weasel wording only partially accounts for the false impression left by "Ligeia." The narrator's statements in the first part of the tale, about Ligeia and his involvement in her death, seem, indeed, deliberately misleading. The use of the "shadow" metaphor to describe Ligeia's "struggle" with death, for example, may be described as a form of weasel wording. However, in the second part of the tale, which deals with the supposedly miraculous return of Ligeia, the narrator is himself evidently unaware of the literal meaning of his statement about the "shadow" on the floor. Thus, that statement is literally true, but conveys a false impression, and one which plays a decisive role in establishing the idea that supernatural agency was involved. Strictly speaking, however, this cannot be described as weasel wording, for the narrator, in that particular instance, appears not to have had the intention of deceiving the reader. On

the contrary, the blunder that blows his cover appears to be an honest mistake. The only alternative would be to suppose the narrator only pretended he did not recognise his own shadow—which makes no sense, however we look at it.

This peculiar blindness, or more precisely this inability to recognise what he sees is one of the defining traits of the narrator. It also defines the tale. If he knew what the shadow was, the reader would have identified it at once. But then, if he could see it for what it was, he would have grasped what was really going on, and therefore his tale would be very different. This blindness is both a symptom and a metaphor of a more fundamental cognitive impairment which is the distinctive trait of the femicide character. If he knew who he *really* was, the reader would reject his rhetoric at once. This blindness, then, is what makes the femicide dangerous. In Macnish's tale, William's confession constitutes a threat to the public not because there is any real risk of it being confused with a true story, but because there is a real risk of the public being taken in by his rhetoric. The femicide is sorry for what he has done but claims to have mended his ways. He is, of course, against femicide, and chums up with the implicitly male reader, seeking empathy. After all, he suggests, *we* are all on the same side.

William is truly convinced that his deed could not be explained. He clearly suggests his acts were prompted by some innate psychological imbalance. Later, in Bulwer-Lytton's and Dickens's femicide stories, the femicide was represented explicitly as a "madman." Poe adopted an intermediate position. While his narrators were not certified lunatics, most suggested that they were, somehow, not quite sane: Egæus had his strange obsession; the narrator of "The Black Cat" denies that he is not mad, thus effectively suggesting that he is; the narrator of "Ligeia" speaks of his "incipient madness" and moments of "mental alienation" (Poe, "Ligeia" 320-21). They all agree, therefore, that the killings were entirely unmotivated, and therefore unavoidable. And, in the sense that they are permitted to present their stories in their own way without contest this is the official explanation.



And so, though the femicide story is not, like she supposed, a true crime story, the fiction itself appears to represent the masculinist perspective Russell strived to displace. In other words, it would appear that the fact of its being a fiction makes little practical difference. Indeed, the argument Jane Caputi and Russell make about the real-life Canadian femicide Mark Lépine appears to apply to William the Femicide:

Whether such a killer is ‘demented’ is beside the point. Fixation on the pathology of perpetrators of violence against women only obscures the social control function of these acts. In a racist and sexist society, psychotic as well as supposedly normal men frequently act out the ubiquitous racist, misogynist, and homophobic attitudes with which they are raised and which they repeatedly see legitimized”

(“Sexist Terrorism” 14-15)

Femicide, like rape, then, is “a form of terrorism that serves to preserve gender status quo,” and neither should be regarded as “products of some inexplicable deviance” (Caputi and Russell, “Sexist Terrorism” 14-15). This is above discussion. To say that the femicide is a freak is to deny the existence of femicide, considered as a culturally and politically determined phenomenon.

To pathologise may, indeed, be a way of dodging the political implications of these crimes. It all depends on how “inexplicable” one is willing to regard the deviance. If one regards the deviate as a person that performs non-motivated actions, or actions the motives of which are in no way determined by his environment, then a “mad” criminal is no one’s responsibility. But that is the femicide’s opinion. The author, on the other hand, while he was completely “earnest” in his simulation of his character’s feelings and opinions, employed all means compatible with the air of truth he intended to confer to his tale to suggest that the crimes were not unexplainable, but the inevitable result of William’s ideological background and upbringing. That is, Macnish signals to the kind of reader that was used to the ruses of *Blackwood’s* magazine that William’s sexual preferences were the inevitable result of his views on women. Indeed, he makes it very clear that the

femicide's hostility to Mary is determined by the same propensities that prevented him from "loving" no one but "pure," or chaste women like his sister. Necrophilia appears to be the only conceivable solution to his dilemma. In other words, Macnish makes it as obvious as possible that no one *but* a femicide could think and feel as his character does about women. This effect is achieved through an irony which depends on the fictional structure of the tale. Russell, of course, being unaware that the tale was a fiction, did not detect this irony.

Macnish discredits not only the femicide's character, but even the femicide's interpretation of himself, by making the evidence he presents in support of his theory manifestly inadequate for that purpose. The femicide, it is true, ultimately traces his crime to an unexplainable, inborn principle of evil, referring his own story to the contemporary debate over the relative importance of heredity and environment in the development of personality:

There are those who say that man is the child of circumstances, and that the evil or the good qualities he possesses are attributable to external events, and are not implanted into him by nature at his birth. There are those who impute all these things to education, and make the human mind an impassive machine, fit only for receiving impressions and having no positive agency of its own. If there was ever a being whose progress through life gave contradiction to such ideas, it is the writer of these "Confessions." I was brought up by the hands of virtue, and its heavenly precepts were early instilled into my mind—and what has been the result of such cultivation? Despair and sorrow to my parents—shame and misery to myself.

(Macnish, *Confessions* 5)

The femicide sees no connection, therefore, between his education and his crime. But the author clearly saw it, and meant the painstaking reader to perceive it too. In the passage just transcribed, for example, the reference to "heavenly precepts" imbibed from early evinces a blindness that is comparable to tragic irony, in the sense that it foreshadows the narrator's

irresistible tendency to idealise women as celestial beings, as well as his hostility toward sexuality. There are other, even more compelling signs that his education was, if not the origin, at least a factor in the development of the “inhuman” propensities of the narrator. He says of his mother, who died when he was sixteen: “She was not made for this world, either in frame or mind” (Macnish, *Confessions* 7). As for his father:

When I recall from other years his noble and manly virtues, I shrink at the sense of my own worthlessness. (...) I was going to say that he died broken-spirited for her departure—but no, the soul of man is not so easily bowed down. It sustains such losses with triumphant force, while the sensitive heart of woman sinks beneath them. (...) My father did not pine, and weep, and sigh, like a love-sick girl. He triumphed apparently over his loss. (Macnish, *Confessions* 7-8).

One would say this is precisely the kind of thinking that befits a femicide.

Upon the death of his father, William inherited the family estate, and assumed the patriarchal authority in the family. He becomes the head of a family of two, constituted by him and his sister. This, as will later become apparent, was what he intimately desired. Indeed, he describes this period of his life in terms that suggest that he should have liked to make the situation permanent—as permanent as a marriage. “Few places were so retired,” he recalls, “and here, if my miserable tone of mind had permitted, I must have been happy. I had no companion but an only sister,” (Macnish, *Confessions* 8). But sex—what else?—ruins William’s pre-lapsarian idyll. He seduces Mary, which he tacitly represents as an intruder in this scene of domestic bliss with his sister, and thereby renounces the child-like perfection of his supposedly sexless attachment to the latter. But the cause of this fall from grace was, he implies, Mary’s own “taint” of humanity. None of these peculiarities allay the suspicions that his education played a part in the development of his “demented” character.

The femicide seems to regard the period of his cohabitation with his sister, indeed, as a realisation of his extremely idealised conception of the intercourse between the sexes. Sexual desire,

personified by Mary Elliston, however, which could not be denied, seduced him from the path of virtue. Thus, we are given to understand what the narrator himself never even imagined: that his hostility for Mary was a projection of his hostility towards sexuality itself. The author evidently does not share William's enthusiasm for "pure" attachments, although the double effect at which he aims prevents him from saying so. The real distinction is not between those who believe that the story is real and those who recognise it as fiction, but between those who detect the irony in the tale, and those who do not.

In other words, the femicide story has two morals—this is true of all femicide stories, and it is what fundamentally distinguishes them from stories like "La Barbe Bleue." One of them is implied in the femicide's rhetoric, which depends on his theory of predestination. The other implied moral is supported by an alternate authority which is coded in the text. This flows not from the narrator's explicit rhetoric, but from the rhetoric of fiction. This authority should, as a matter of principle, be regarded as distinct from the outlook of the characters. It roughly corresponds to what Wayne C. Booth and Michael Riffaterre called respectively the "implied author" and "style." According to the former, "[o]ur picture of" the author "is built (...) only partly by the narrator's explicit commentary; it is even more derived from the kind of tale he chooses to tell" (*Rhetoric* 73). This picture, Booth argues, must be distinguished from the narrative voice:

It is a curious fact that we have no terms either for this created 'second self' or for our relationship with him. None of our terms for various aspects of the narrator is quite accurate. "Persona," "mask," and "narrator" are sometimes used, but they more commonly refer to the speaker in the work who is after all only one of the elements created by the implied author and who may be separated from him by large ironies. "Narrator" is usually taken to mean the "I" of a work, but the "I" is seldom if ever identical with the implied image of the artist. (73)

Booth's notion of "implied author" is comparable to Riffaterre's notion of "style:" "Le texte fonctionne comme le program d'un ordinateur pour nous faire faire l'expérience de l'unique. Unique auquel on donne le nom de style, et qu'on a longtemps confondu avec l'individu hypothétique appelé auteur: en fait, *le style, c'est le texte même*" (Riffaterre, "L'Explication" 8).

Indeed, the concepts of "implied author" and "style" reflect the authors' view that the voice that speaks in a work of fiction must not be identified as a matter of course with the author, as represented in the text by the "I" that speaks. As Riffaterre puts it, the presence of the author may or may not be explicitly coded in the text: "Dans le premier cas, la présence de l'auteur est encodé (par ex., cas d'un récit autobiographique à la première personne), le *je* de l'écrivain n'étant alors qu'un cas particulier de la représentation des personnages. (...) Dans le second cas, l'auteur n'est pas dans le text, mais le lecteur l'imagine sans peine et l'y replace" (Riffaterre, "L'Explication" 10). Thus, for the purposes of literary analysis, the author is coextensive with the text, and therefore must be distinguished both from any fictional "I," even when this is a third-person non-participant narrator, and from the individual who wrote the text.

I bring these problematisations of narrative authority to the discussion not so much as models of my analysis, but because they are classic statements of a fundamental theoretical distinction which I believe is essential to understanding the femicide story. These stories are always told from an "I" point of view, which nominally represents the author. This identification with an ostensibly fictional narrator, who participates in the events narrated, is always problematic, for it entails a fundamental irony. But, aside from this basic irony, these tales abound with "large ironies," as Booth puts it, that further disturb the identification. In fact, the ironies counteract the apparently undisputed authority of the narrator over his narrative to such an extent that they make the identification impossible in almost every sense.

The irony in these stories is so radical that they have more than one implied reader. Indeed, we may distinguish three kinds of implied readers in Macnish's original hoax: first, those who

believe the narrative is factual—if nothing else, this group is a textual fact, as, in Macnish’s time at least, most readers must have gathered it was fiction; secondly, those who, although identifying the narrative as fiction, are persuaded by the femicide’s rhetoric, and are thereby left in the uncomfortable position of not being able to reject the offer of friendship of a man who committed a terrible crime, or fathom the author’s intentions—this is the class of readers Macnish hoped would “stare” at *Confessions*, for he must have realised, of course, that the “no fiction” disclaimer would not convince; a third group is constituted by the crafty readers who can extricate themselves from William and get at the “implied author,” or “style,” which, in this case, can be safely regarded as representing the actual author’s moral take on his character.

In order to obtain this complex effect, however, Macnish had to strike a very difficult balance. First of all, his character would have to be absolutely “earnest,” in the sense Poe gives to the word, that is, Macnish would have to state the opinions of his narrator as if he truly believed them, making them his own. Secondly, the feelings and the opinions of the femicide would have to be believable. They could not be too absurd, so as not to prevent the reader from accepting them as something someone might honestly believe, but neither should they appear too reasonable. If the femicide was to produce a sensation he had to appear reasonable and balanced in all but that which is directly connected with his mania. Poe’s practice, as well as his theory, shows us that he understood perfectly the techniques that enabled Macnish to realise this effect, and in “Ligeia” he perfected them to such a degree that he kept people staring much harder, and this in despite of his having acknowledged authorship from the start. The exquisite terror of his tale arguably flowed from the sense that there was something wrong with the narrator, and perhaps with the author. But, though intrinsically repulsive, the femicide is disturbingly similar to other men of his time, and this is what makes him as dangerous as a narrator as he had been as a criminal. In short, the secret of the femicide story is camouflage. And Poe’s femicides in “Berenice,” “Morella,” and “Ligeia” are even better camouflaged than Macnish’s, Dickens’s, or Bulwer-Lytton’s. None of them tells the reader he

is a femicide. Some of them do not even realise they have killed (this appears to be, indeed, the case of Egæus, in the first of these tales)!

The femicide story is therefore inherently political, in the broadest sense of the word. If real-life femicides were as consummate dissemblers as William, they might live among us without our knowing. Thus, Macnish forces the reader to consider the nicer political implications of femicide of which the femicide himself is unaware—this, incidentally, was precisely Russell's point. William pushes—or more precisely, Macnish pushes—the sentimental love cliché of the angel-woman to absurd lengths. Evidently, Macnish intended to target specifically, albeit indirectly, the sentimental ideology that dehumanises women, by associating it with the most abject character of seducer that his time could conceive. Thus, the femicide story poses an implied challenge to the reader. We must either deny the femicide, if we can, or accept the story in his own terms. William, of course, saw nothing wrong in the way he conceived of women.

In fact, William's views, in themselves, are perfectly conventional—were it not for the crucial fact, femicide, we might imagine Macnish was not only “earnest,” but sincere. The same applies to Poe. Indeed, critics have long been aware of the femicidal tendency of the extreme sentimentalism of Poe's narrators, but this has mostly been attributed directly to Poe, through the conventional identification of the author with the “I” of the tale. One of Poe's most famous critical statements, from “The Philosophy of Composition,” is habitually taken as proof of this identification. When he conceived the poem that would become “The Raven,” Poe writes:

I asked myself— “Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the *most* melancholy?” Death—was the obvious reply. “And when,” I said, “is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?” From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious—“When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is,

unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.” (65)

Poe cleverly avoids commitment by speaking of the “*universal* understanding of mankind.” Gender is significant in the context. Women, for obvious reasons, might not appreciate the poetry of the topic quite as much as men. It has been generally assumed that Poe was peculiarly obsessed with dead or dying women, and psychoanalytical readings of his work have done much to promote this view. However, Poe is here making a statement about the general taste of the male public of his day, to the effect that they found dead women beautiful, without committing himself to that view. Indeed, he here emphasises that a writer is obliged to cater the taste of the majority of his readers, not his own.

In his letter to T. W. White, which I have quoted earlier (April 8, 1835, Letter 42), regarding the scandalous “Berenice,” Poe had made the same point. There he made it clear that all writers, and not just those who lived by their pens, were obliged to meet the expectations of the public. “To be appreciated,” he explained,

you must be *read*, and these things are invariably sought after with avidity. They are, if you will take notice, the articles which find their way into other periodicals, and into the papers, and in this manner, taking hold upon the public mind they augment the reputation of the source where they originated. Such articles are the “M.S. found in a Madhouse” and the “Moinos and Daimonos” of the London New Monthly—the “Confessions of an Opium-Eater” and the “Man in the Bell” of Blackwood. The two first were written by no less a man than Bulwer—the *Confessions* [being] universally attributed to Coleridge—although unjustly. Thus the first men in [England] have not thought writings of this nature unworthy of their talents.

(*Letters* 85 conjectural additions by the editors)



This general endorsement of sensationalist literature is significantly prompted by “Berenice,” the first of Poe’s tales to openly depict extreme violence against women. Indeed, Poe’s tales about what was regarded as the “most poetic of topics” either openly depict or imply some act of violence perpetrated by the male “lover” on his “beloved” female. Poe’s tales and poems in which femicide is blended with the sentimental commonplaces of his day, were, I believe, intended as parodies of the kind of morbid sentimentality the best expression of which was the common idea that death became women.

Indeed, the femicide deploys the rhetoric of the “male ‘angelographers,’” to use Gilbert and Gubar’s phrase (*Madwoman* 25). These authors remark that the “moral cult of the angel-woman” was associated with “the aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty” (25). Echoing Wollstonecraft’s critique of the extreme patriarchal ideology that underlies such representations, they add that women were in fact being encouraged to “feign morbid weakness or actually to ‘decline’ into real illness” (25). Thus, the social expression of the rhetoric of the “angelographers” was what Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English called “‘the cult of female invalidism’” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 54). Wollstonecraft herself already suggested that men, at least in the upper and middle classes, were sexually attracted to sick or apparently sick women.

Gilbert and Gubar, of course, regard Poe as the most extreme representative of this kind of patriarchal sensibility; as the paradigm of the “angelographer” whose works depicted that “emblematic ‘beautiful woman’ whose *death*, thought Edgar Allan Poe, ‘is unquestionably the most poetic topic in the world’” (*Madwoman* 25). This, of course, is one of Poe’s most famous statements, from “The Philosophy of Composition.” I think, however, that this reading of Poe is impaired by the same kind of misjudgment that Russell made in Macnish’s case, that of confusing the author with his narrator.

This sort of sensibility was, indeed, as prevalent in Poe’s day as he suggests in “Philosophy.” Countless examples spring to mind, but I will instance here only one: the novel *Eugene Aram*

(1832), by Bulwer-Lytton himself. This novel appears to me to be a particularly clear expression of precisely the kind of implicit prejudice against women that Macnish had projected on his femicide, and also one of the most perfect statements of the cult of female invalidism. The novel is a fictionalisation of the true story of the self-taught scholar, and pioneer philologist of the same name who in 1759 had been sentenced to death for the murder of Daniel Clark, presumed to have been committed in 1744. Aram's trial attracted considerable attention at the time. In the early 1830s there was a resurgence of interest in his story which resulted in the publication of two popular works of literature: Thomas Hood's ballad "The Dream of Eugene Aram" (1831) and Bulwer-Lytton's novel (1832).

Aram's case remained a source of enduring perplexity because it challenged common notions of criminal psychology. How could this well-liked, well-spoken, intelligent, and highly educated man be capable of murder? Both Hood's ballad and Bulwer-Lytton's novel are attempts to explain this perplexing case that brought into question the reassuring fiction that there was a "criminal type," that is, that murderers had a peculiar behavior by which they could be easily distinguished from, and identified by honest people. Thus, these authors treated Aram as a problem in psychology, and therefore naturally relied heavily on a subjective perspective. During the trial, it surfaced that he had the peculiar habit of talking to himself, which, of course, provided an excellent pretext to represent the inner workings of his mind. The writers therefore imagined Aram's soliloquies, projecting in them their interpretation of his character.

At their hands, Aram becomes a Romantic hero. Yet, while in Hood's ballad he is unequivocally represented as the murderer of Daniel Clark, Bulwer-Lytton, through a conviction that the crime of which he had been convicted was incompatible with his character, takes some liberties with the facts to render him more agreeable to his public. One of these changes is particularly significant, I think, to our purposes. The real-life Aram was married—his wife, incidentally, was one of the key witnesses for the accusation. Bulwer-Lytton, however, seems to

have thought that this woman was not a suitable romantic interest for a man like Aram. Apparently, he thought that only an “ideal” woman would be right for his hero.

In the novel, Aram falls in love with Madeline Lester, a lofty-minded and exquisitely sensitive girl, who performs the conventionally sentimental role of saving the hero from himself, and more particularly, from the solipsism into which his reflective and earnest disposition, and his studious habits had plunged him. Madeline, in other words, tempers Aram’s cold reason with some “feminine” feeling.

At the time of his arrest, the real Aram was a schoolteacher—in fact, he was arrested in the school that employed him at the time. Bulwer-Lytton’s Aram, however, was a sort of austere dilettante who studied solely for the sake of knowledge, and was wealthy enough to lead a comfortable life without having to worry about his next meal. In the novel, he is arrested in the day in which his marriage to Madeline Lester was to take place. Thus, the author of the novel manipulates the facts in order to provide Aram with a bride that is the perfect embodiment of the patriarchal stereotype of the virgin who was too good for this corrupt world.

Indeed, after Aram’s arrest, Madeline suffers a sudden change of appearance. Her relatives and future husband alike regard this change as a sure sign of imminent death. This change is very similar to those that Morella and Ligeia suffer—particularly the latter—, as are the feelings this change excite in the narrators:

About the end of the second month the effect upon her health grew visible. Her color, naturally delicate as the hues of the pink shell or the youngest rose, faded into one marble whiteness, which again, as time proceeded, flushed into that red and preternatural hectic, which once settled, rarely yields its place but to the colours of the grave. Her flesh sunk from its rounded and noble proportions. Deep hollows traced themselves beneath eyes which yet grew even more lovely as they grew less serenely bright. (Bulwer-Lytton, *Eugene Aram* 3: 165-66)

Again, on the eve of Aram's trial, Madeline got worse, and yet, according to the narrator, which in this fully agrees with the characters of the narrative, more lovely still. On her face,

nothing of herself, save the divine and unearthly expression which had always characterized her loveliness, was left. (...) hushed in a death-like and solemn repose, the parted lips moving inaudibly; the eye fixed on vacancy; the wan transparent hands, crossed upon her bosom; the light shone with a more softened and tender ray upon the faded but all-angelic form and countenance of *her*, for whom Heaven was already preparing its eternal recompense for the ills of Earth!

(Bulwer-Lytton, *Eugene Aram* 3:188)

The latent morbid eroticism of these passages reaches a climax on the morning of the trial: "And when Madeline *was* dressed, though the robe sat loose in large folds over her shrunken form, yet, as she stood erect, (...) perhaps her beauty never seemed of a more striking and lofty character, —she looked, indeed, a bride, but the bride of no earthly nuptials" (Bulwer-Lytton, *Eugene Aram* 3:188).

Thus, the kind of female beauty that Bulwer-Lytton valued most highly is clearly equated with sickness and death, as well as chastity. He evidently feels that "marble whiteness," "wan fingers," an unhealthy flush, and an emaciated body become women. Significantly, the narrator of "Ligeia" uses similar terms to describe his wife: he speaks of "her lofty, her ethereal nature;" even in health, he tells us, she had a "marble hand;" after her change, her "pale fingers (...) became the transparent waxen hue of the grave" (Poe, "Ligeia" 311-316). And then, of course, he only truly loved her in death. Furthermore, he is also convinced that her expression, which he, like Bulwer-Lytton, invests with a transcendent significance, was the token of her true, purely spiritual identity, and therefore purely womanly, which is here contrasted with the "impure" physical appearance she had displayed in health. This sort of language certainly appears to justify Wollstonecraft's contention that man preferred unhealthy women—or women who affected debility

Nature has given woman a weaker frame than man; but, to ensure her husband's affections, must a wife, who by the exercise of her mind and body whilst she was discharging the duties of a daughter, wife, and mother, has allowed her constitution to retain its natural strength, and her nerves a healthy tone, is she, I say, to condescend to use art and feign a sickly delicacy in order to secure her husband's affection? (*Vindication* 98)

Wollstonecraft argues that man's morbid taste for women in ill health had actually contributed to make them sick: "sedentary employments render the majority of women sickly—and false notions of female excellence make them proud of this delicacy, though it be another fetter" (*Vindication* 145). One must admit, at least, that Bulwer-Lytton's portrayal of Madeline raises serious suspicions that this might indeed have been the case.

Evidently, the author thought that the death of a beautiful woman was a very poetical subject indeed. More precisely, he gives his reader the distinct impression that woman is most beautiful when closer to death; that death becomes her. The male figures of authority in the novel, Madeline's father and husband to be, take this logic one step further. They both articulate the desire that she might die as quickly as possible, rather than have her pure "spiritual" nature spoiled by the corruption of the world. "If the innocent is to perish, the sooner she joins him [Aram] the better," says the former; "let her die," the latter said, "let her die; she at least is certain of Heaven!" (Bulwer-Lytton *Eugene Aram* 3:178). The moral of such remarks is that it better *for a woman* to die than to lose her innocence. Madeline could not survive the dishonourable death of the man she loved. What is more, there is a consensus in the novel that she *should* not outlive him. Hers is the perfect illustration of the ideal of self-sacrificing "womanly" love the femicide reveres. This, I would argue, forms a sort of latent femicidal feeling that, although particularly extreme in this case, is perfectly typical of much of the literature of the period, and would remain so throughout the Victorian age.

In a sense, Bulwer-Lytton's novel is not only implicitly femicidal—one might say that he actually committed femicide by deletion. As I have before stated, the real Eugene Aram had a wife, who testified against him, but Bulwer-Lytton saw fit to strike her off of the story. She appears transfigured, as it were, in the novel, as Aram's "landlady"—the woman in whose house he lodged during his stay in Knaresborough, the place where Daniel Clark, the man he was accused of murdering, had last been seen. In the novel, the landlady tells the court that, in the night of his disappearance, Clark had left her house with Houseman and Aram—he was never seen alive after this. In reality, Aram lived at the time with his wife. When he fled Knaresborough, he left her there. The testimony Bulwer-Lytton attributes to the landlady is actually based on Anna Aram's statement. The scholar's real-life wife appears in the novel, then, as a doting old woman, so the role of romantic interest could be taken over by the starry-eyed, well-read Madeline, who, as I said earlier, existed only in Bulwer-Lytton's imagination.

This suggests, as I have before said, that Bulwer-Lytton thought Aram's real wife was not fit for an intellectual—and so, since she was not convenient for his purposes, he did away with her. This, then, is what I have earlier called femicide by deletion. But Bulwer-Lytton also concealed another significant fact. Aram's real wife, aside from providing the testimony that ultimately led to the conviction of Aram and Houseman, as an accomplice, for the murder of Daniel Clark, claimed to have heard them plotting her murder. I find Bulwer-Lytton's omission of this fact very significant, especially considering the exact words of Anna Aram's testimony, as reported in *The Genuine Account of the Trial of Eugene Aram*,<sup>57</sup> the often-reprinted and widely-available account of the case, from which Bulwer-Lytton himself probably took much of the information for his novel.<sup>58</sup>

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57 The book also contained a transcription of Aram's defense, the short autobiography he wrote at the bidding of the clergyman who attended him in prison before he was executed, fragments of his unfinished philological treatise, and his suicide note. Indeed, Aram made an unsuccessful attempt to kill himself by cutting his wrists with a razor on the eve of his execution.

I have used the "tenth edition," dated 1810. The book was originally published in 1759 (this is confirmed by the catalogue of the Bodleian Library, which has a record for a copy of the second edition of that year).

58 In the Preface to the slightly revised 1840 edition of the novel, Bulwer-Lytton writes he "endeavoured to collect such anecdotes of Aram's life and manners as tradition and hearsay still kept afloat. (...) His personal and moral peculiarities, as described in these pages, are such as were related to me by many who had heard him described by his contemporaries" ("Preface to the Present Edition" x). These inquiries, however, were not pursued with a view to

She told the court that, in the night in which the crime allegedly occurred, Houseman and Clark had visited Aram at the couple's home, and that all three had left together. Some hours later, Aram and Houseman returned, without Clark, who was never seen again. Aram then dismissed his wife, and locked himself up with Houseman. She, however, "being desirous to know what" they "were doing," eavesdropped on the pair:

she heard Houseman say to Aram, She is coming. Her husband replied, We'll not let her. Houseman then said, If she does, she'll tell. What can she tell? Replies Aram, poor simple thing! (...) Houseman said, Something must be done to prevent her telling, and pressed him to it very much; and said, If she does not tell now, she may at some other time. No, said her husband, We will coax her a little until her passion be off, and then take an opportunity to shoot her" (*Genuine Account* 7-6).

Aram himself, according to the same published account of his case, would, in the morning of his execution, confess the crime, alleging that his wife had been the cause of his misfortunes. He is reported to also have said then that he had found out that she and Clark were lovers. Neither Aram nor any of the other witnesses had mentioned this suspicion during the trial. But then, Clark was known to have come into possession of some valuable jewelry, which provided the accusation with a probable motive. In any event, Bulwer-Lytton, perhaps because he considered the confession apocryphal, omitted it altogether, along with the motive Aram there assigned to his crime and the wife herself. In any case, Bulwer-Lytton could not believe Aram was a cold-blooded murderer. In the first edition of his novel, the actual crime is committed by Houseman, Aram becoming only his accomplice; in later revisions, Aram is the murderer, but the crime is described in terms that evoke the Faustian myth, so central to Romantic mythology, and therefore its guilt is somewhat mitigated.

It is impossible to know for certain what happened, of course. But one thing at least is clear: Bulwer-Lytton concurred with the Aram of the *Genuine Account* that his wife Anna was a "simple

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clarify the circumstances of the crime for which Aram was convicted or his trial, but rather to attempt to confirm his idea that the case involved "a contradiction of one deed at war with a whole life" (xv).

thing” who was not worthy of her husband. He suppressed her for sentimental reasons, replacing her with the unrealistic Madeline, on which he projected all the clichés of ideal womanhood that the femicides project on their beloved dead women. Madeline represents the ideal woman that is too “good” for this world. The irony, of course, is that Bulwer-Lytton had to make her up.

But this is clearly an unintended irony. The same male sentimental ideology underlies both *Eugene Aram* and the femicide story, but there are significant differences in the way it is handled. What particularly distinguishes the two is precisely the absence of any shred of anything that may be even vaguely construed as *intended* irony in Bulwer-Lytton’s statement of this ideology, and also the absence of actual acts of violence against women. To put it another way, the difference between the femicide and the narrator of Bulwer-Lytton’s novel is that the latter *does not kill or mistreat any women*. Thus, the novel leaves no room in the reader’s mind that these were the sentiments of the author. It is an entirely different matter with the femicide story.

There, the ideology which Bulwer-Lytton conveys with sincerity, is associated, implicitly or explicitly, with femicide. Thus, the implied, unseen sexist aggression of the kind of rhetoric Bulwer-Lytton used is brought out and realised in a deed of actual violence. Bulwer-Lytton’s sympathetic treatment of Aram even leads him to suppress the suspicion of meditated femicide from his account.<sup>59</sup> But this is done in a way that actually confirms, as we have seen, the unworthiness of the “simple” real wife, and consequently reiterates the cult of the angel-woman. That is, Aram was provided with an utterly unreal “worthy” bride, devoted to the point of sacrifice. The femicide story, of course, implies that the sentimentalism that prompts this substitution is perverse. And this is at the root of the effect Macnish aimed to create. Inasmuch as the reader may conceivably share some views with the femicide, the reader may be, he suggests, an accomplice to femicide, or worse, a potential femicide.

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<sup>59</sup> Bulwer-Lytton also tacitly disqualifies Anna Aram’s testimony in his preface to the 1840 edition of the novel by stating that “the legal evidence against” Eugene Aram “is extremely deficient—and furnished almost entirely by one (Houseman) confessedly an accomplice to the crime, and a partner in the booty” (“Preface to the Present Edition” xiii).



But this is not to say that Macnish was anything approaching what we would now call a feminist, or even that he sympathised with the incipient movement for the emancipation of women in his epoch. So far from it, he actually regarded women intellectuals with scorn. “I see those masculine-feminines,” he writes Moir, “the \* \* \* \* damsels, have brought out a couple of volumes. What an itch for writing these ladies have!;” adding insult to injury, he adds: “I should not like to marry one of them:—confirmed blue-stockings” (Moir, *The Modern Pythagorean* 1:202-203).

Macnish conceived female authorship as a breach of gender roles; as an illegitimate encroachment on male privilege. The purpose of a woman’s life, he further implies, is to become a wife, a state he thinks is incompatible with an intellectual career. That is why, according to him, the women of Edinburgh compare unfavorably to those of Glasgow. The first evince “blue-stocking propensities. They have a tremendous opinion of themselves, which accounts for there being so many old maids in the Modern Athens;” whereas the latter “are nice and ignorant, and do not plague one with learning. On this account I greatly prefer them to the self-conceited damsels of the metropolis [meaning Edinburgh]. Women should never be as wise as man” (Moir, *The Modern Pythagorean* 1:203). The women of Glasgow, then, make the best wives.

I have no intention of extenuating, much less justify, Macnish’s misogyny. But he certainly was no femicide—not literally. On the contrary, he indirectly holds society as a whole responsible for nurturing people like William, who preyed on women. But his critique is rooted on a strictly conservative position on gender relationships. This may seem strange to a modern reader, but in this Macnish is a perfect representative of his time. Politically conservative writers in those days typically thought that women should not lead public lives, and should be concerned only with managing their households and raising their children. However, they seldom idealised them. This idealisation was much more common among the political left in those days. Indeed, Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* specifically targeted equalitarian writers, such as Rousseau, who left women out of their project of political emancipation.

Macnish, then, did not question bourgeois family values. He was not pushing for the abolition of the segregated spheres of male and female activity, nor did he see any need for a radical revision of the way people looked at conjugality. But he also did not endorse the kind of enthusiastic, unrealistic idealisation of womanhood which writers like Bulwer-Lytton were promoting, and of which his femicide story is, I think, an implied critique. It is harder to ascertain Poe's position relative to the political trends of his time. His unreliable narrators kill learned women, and this distinguishes them from all previous femicides, because in his time conservative and radical writers were, for the most part, equally hostile to female intellectuals.

We find the same extreme idealisation of women and the concomitant exaltation of "spiritual" love in some of the writers who, in those days, had advocated radical changes in the structure of the family. Godwin, for example, one of the leading radical figures proposed, in his *Political Justice* (1793), to replace traditional forms of conjugality with a new rational plan for the relation between the sexes. This emphasised intellectual communion, and an idealised, "spiritual" affection, at the expense of erotic bonds, which Godwin condemned as "irrational." These projects generally entailed a very negative outlook on sexual intercourse.

Such revolutionary theories provided an easy target for satire. Washington Irving's "The Adventure of the German Student" (1824) is a good example. The tale, which is significantly set in revolutionary France, is a satire on the ideal of "rational" cohabitation between the sexes promoted, among others, by Godwin. The protagonist is a German student who combines the mystical leanings then associated with his native country with a fascination with violent political change. One night, while taking his daily stroll—as might be expected, he only came out at night—, this revolutionary visionary meets a fascinating and sophisticated woman. Agreeing that the ceremony of marriage had no meaning, the couple decide to sleep together without ceremony. How little Irving sympathised with the couple's morals is indicated by the fact that the student finds out the next morning that he had slept with a dead, beheaded woman—a victim of the Guillotine.

In the 1990 article “Poe’s ‘Ligeia’: Poe’s Debt to Irving and Emerson,” Jerry A. Herndon wrote that “Poe may have imitated elements” of this tale in “Ligeia,” “in order to produce a sharply focused satire of Emerson’s transcendental thought, as formulated in *Nature*, published two years before” (113). Although Poe could, and probably had Emerson in mind, I do not think that he was interested in ridiculing him specifically, but rather the loosely defined idealism that he referred to as “transcendentalism,” and which, for him, was a by-word for silliness.

I think Irving’s tale is not so much a direct influence, but more an indirect one—but one of which nonetheless Poe, who knew Irving’s work very well, must have been aware. Indeed, the parallel identified by Herndon is rather unspecific. Irving’s narrator declares that he had the story from the mouth of the protagonist, who was confined in a madhouse, and Poe’s narrator is also suspected of being a madman. According to Herndon, “the two stories share this significant characteristic, and another as well: a hint of necrophilia. In Irving’s it is more than a hint. Did the guillotined corpse ever had a head at all?” (Herndon, “Poe’s ‘Ligeia’” 117). These characteristics, however, were shared by a number of other short fictions, notably Macnish’s *Confessions*, with which Poe’s “Ligeia” has even more striking similarities, and whose authors may themselves have been influenced by Irving.

Nevertheless, “The Adventure of the German Student” is important because it shows us that some writers in conservative quarters were in the habit of ridiculing the radicals for what they perceived as an excessive, unrealistic idealisation of love that precluded a healthy sex-life. The bookish student spent so much time dreaming of the ideal woman, and in fact, indulging his onanism fantasies in silent reclusion, that he became alienated from real-life women. In fact, Irving clearly implies that no living woman could ever live up to his fantasies.<sup>60</sup> Hence—this is the ghastly

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<sup>60</sup> The onanism of the student is clearly hinted in the following passage, of which, incidentally, there may be an echo in Dickens’s “A Madman’s Manuscript:” “He was too shy and ignorant of the world to make any advances to the fair, but he was a passionate admirer of female beauty, and in his lonely chamber would often lose himself in reveries on forms and faces which he had seen, and his fancy would deck out images of loveliness far surpassing the reality” (Irving 22). Dickens’s madman, as we have seen, says: “I don’t remember forms of faces, now, but I know the girl was beautiful” (Dickens, “Madman” 141).

innuendo—, for him, the only good woman was a dead woman. Irving's caricature was therefore only a step away from femicide—and a small one at that.

The student's dissatisfaction with all existing women is, after all, an implied form of misogyny that could easily degenerate into hostility. I am convinced that Macnish, whose *Confessions* appeared scarcely three years after Irving's tale, intended to exploit this very implication. But his character, unlike Irving's, was the narrator of his own story, and was therefore allowed to present himself as a reformed femicide. But the same blindness that saved him also makes him betray himself, in the end, to the attentive reader of his confessions. And then Poe's narrator, the most effective dissembler of all, because the most self-deluded, came along.

Coded along with his crime, is the indisputable evidence of Poe's unoriginality. Yet, who can deny that he improved on the already impressive feat of simulation of his predecessor? Macnish wrote a tale that no reader acquainted with the literary conventions of *Blackwood's* could believe was "no fiction." Poe took the basic storyline, the risqué theme, the character of the fictional writer-protagonist, the strictly subjective perspective that determined the characteristic form of the tale, and, most of all, the earnest tone. He only changed what he called the "thesis," and proceeded to perform what no one would believe was possible. He wrote an ostensible fiction that has been, to this day, mostly taken as a true story about Poe.

No one believes, of course, that the story happened to Poe. But neither could many readers bring themselves to believe it did not, such is the air of truth of his stories. As George Gilfillan put it as early as 1855, in *Third Gallery of Literary Portraits*, Poe "tells fiction so minutely, and with such apparent simplicity and sincerity, that you almost believe it true" ("Edgar Allan Poe" 334). Indeed, criticism of his work has always been dominated by the feeling that Poe was fundamentally sincere, and that his work, and "Ligeia" in particular, expressed profound aspects of his character of which he himself was unaware. In fact, in practice, it has been assumed that Poe wrote, in a sense, from experience. There is perhaps no better illustration of this than the following passage in Mabbott's

introduction to “Ligeia:” “We cannot doubt that the author intended a story of real magic, as the pentagonal room would suggest. Of course, he did not expect readers to believe the story after they put it down; he wanted temporary suspension of disbelief during its perusal” (*Tales* 307). The very fact that Mabbott felt the necessity of stating what no reader of fiction should forget is hardly reassuring.

Poe, of course, had systematically promoted this confusion between reality and fiction: he provided an important clue to the purpose of this sort of ruse in a small note published in December 13, 1845 in the *Broadway Journal* in which he quoted an article in *The Tribune* about the sensation his hoaxes had caused, going on to state: “For our parts, we find it difficult to understand how any dispassionate transcendentalist can doubt the facts as we state them” (Poe, *Writings in the Broadway Journal* 340).

Despite all this, many critics have believed Poe was somehow writing from experience, and this made him a perfect subject for psychoanalysis; it also resulted in the suspicion of psychiatric imbalance, which provided critics with a simple explanation for the perplexing idiosyncrasies of his work. One of Poe’s many biographers, Edward Wagenknecht, has remarked, many years ago, that there was no real evidence to support that explanation: “if there ever was a life to illustrate the truth that there are many more questions in the world than answers, this is that life. The mind hates incompleteness, and it is not surprising that so many have sought for a formula which will explain everything. Poe was an epileptic. Poe was a manic depressive. Poe was a necrophiliac.<sup>61</sup> Poe was impotent. Poe was syphilitic. And so on, ad infinitum and ad nauseam. If Poe was any one of these, it might indeed give us a clue to his nature. But we have no reason to suppose that he was” (13).

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61 In a note to this passage, Wagenknecht quotes David M. Rein, who, in “Poe’s Introduction, 31-4,” a commentary to those lines in the introductory poem of *Poems* (1831), later retitled “Romance,” makes the very interesting point that, of all the women Poe is said to have loved before he published this poem, “he loved the woman while she was alive and apparently well. In no case did his love depend upon the woman’s dying; in no case did he know the woman and fail to love her until death appeared” (qtd. in Wagenknecht 227n18). Even after, “and until the very end of his life, “Poe loved women who were healthy” (227n18). Although most of his romantic attachments have never amounted to much, Rein stresses an important difference between Poe and the narrator of “Ligeia,” for example, who certainly loved women only after they were death.

But admirers and detractors alike have agreed, with very few exceptions, that Poe *did not* know what he was doing, but he could not help himself; that is, that his work was essentially the product of subconscious elaboration, and therefore manifested the dark side of his psyche. Thus, most Poe criticism has been, for many years, more or less explicitly psychoanalytical, in that it sees Poe's work as something akin to a dream, in the psychoanalytical sense of the word—incidentally, this is also true of most modern readings of Gothic fiction in general. The problem with such views, as Susan Amper points out, is that they lose sight of the decisive difference between dreams and works of literature: "But while dreams may be the products of the dreamer's unconscious, is not a short story largely a conscious creation? (*How to Write* 44). Because they fail to make due allowance for the author's intention, these readings also naturally tend to take Poe, and even his irony, seriously: "Whether the conflict was construed as superego versus id or imagination versus reason, these discussions share a common assumption that the tales present their conflicts essentially in earnest" (Amper, *How to Write* 44).

This resulted in the tacit agreement that all of Poe's serious narrators are Poe himself in disguise. In a limited sense, of course, they are. But the "shadow of a shade" fiasco is designed to teach the reader that the affinity that most have supposed to exist between Poe and his narrator is a ruse. In order to catch Poe, we must first catch his narrator, lest we confuse subconscious urges with design. Poe was a professional writer at a time when people expected literary works to reflect their author's sentiments in a very direct way—they had grown used to that. Poe, who understood this perfectly, projected a "false impression" of himself; in other words, he created a persona that reflected the expectations of his public. He also understood that this public had been persuaded that sincerity had a stamp of truth about it, that it could be recognised intuitively, even in fiction, and exploited the credulity which the spirit of the age promoted by simulating the tone readers were used to equate with sincerity. In this sense, most of his stories are hoaxes.

Poe regarded fiction essentially as an effort of depersonalisation, and this separated him from the Romantics, who thought that fiction was a way, indeed the only way, of embodying and expressing the self; that is, that feigning was the only real way of being sincere. Poe's conception of fiction is implied in his reading of Shakespeare: "He wrote of Hamlet as if Hamlet he were" (Rev. of *The Characters of Shakespeare* 212 emphasis mine). The "as if" is crucial, and marks Poe's divergence from the traditional Romantic reading of Shakespeare: he *was* not Hamlet, he only pretended to be. Poe's narrators, who love women only after they are dead; who pull their teeth; who marry them so they can lock them up in phantasmagoric towers; who love in the child the mother they say they never loved—these men are not Poe—that is, they cannot be directly identified with the author, considered as a textual fact, much less with Poe the man. This much is clear: the author—the author as represented in the tale itself—disliked the femicide. Yet, he had reasons to believe most readers would like him, or at least excuse him. And he was right.

## II – Poe’s Method of Composition and the Sources of “Ligeia”





## 1 — “Chemistry of Intellect:” Poe’s Theory of the Imagination

In the previous chapter I have attempted a definition and survey of the femicide story, and a description of its particular rhetoric. In my individual readings of Poe’s “Berenice,” “Morella,” “Ligeia,” and “The Black Cat,” I have argued that Poe took the basic duplicity of the genre to a new level, creating what I have designated the covert femicide story, which I regard as a particular case of the mystery, as Poe himself had defined it, for example in his reviews of Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge*. This entailed a revision of the common critical representation of Poe as an extreme Romanticist, in which I tried to show results from an undue identification of his opinions with those of the narrators of his tales, as well as from an ingenuous reading of his criticism.

In this chapter, I will be focusing on Poe’s work and attempt a description of his style and method. The single most important characteristic of this style, shared by his fiction and criticism, is an ambiguous tone, which constitutes a special form of irony. This has commonly been seen, especially after G. R. Thompson’s *Poe’s Fiction* (1973) as a form of Romantic irony. I will argue, however, that Poe is not a “Romantic ironist,” but ironically Romantic. I will try to show, then, that in his criticism Poe systematically and unequivocally rejected precisely the sort of extreme Romanticism represented by the narrators of the tales we looked at in the previous chapter. That is, that those narrators are perfect illustrations of the “transcendentalism” Poe denounced in his criticism as the peculiar superstition of his age. I will also try to show that his criticism itself displays the same kind of duplicity that we found in his fiction, and, therefore, that the same kind of close reading that we applied to the tales is usually required to get past the apparent Romanticism of his critical statements, which, when taken at face value, are invariably absurd. Indeed, these statements often appear self-contradictory—but this is, I believe, an effect of the deceitful rhetoric he employed, as a sort of trap to the reader, to which the common idea that Poe was a Romantic in despite of himself may be traced.

The analysis of Poe's irony I propose also involves a study of his sources. But, as Poe's handling of his sources partakes of the irony that characterises his approach, this study demands a special concept of source, which I have derived from Burton R. Pollin's pioneering work in the field. The actual meaning of Poe's criticism, as opposed to the apparent gist of his reviews, usually depends on what may be termed his covert allusions—this is, I insist, the same mechanism we see at play in Poe's fiction. Specifically, though he sometimes appears to praise the “transcendentalism” he constantly and quite ostensibly derides, such praise is always undermined by an “undercurrent of meaning,” just like the ravings of his narrators are exposed by the subterranean meanings Poe coded in his fiction. I believe, therefore, that much of his criticism is inherently satirical. I will argue, specifically, that Poe's theory of imagination, is in fact a theory of the mystery. To put it another way, the mystery, in the sense of a fictional work in which the events depicted are obscured, but can be deduced by the reader, is implied by Poe's theory of poetry as a whole, and not just the review of *Barnaby Rudge*.

I will also attempt to show that “Ligeia” is the perfect embodiment of Poe's theory, and the finest product of his art of composition, as he himself defined it; that it is not an instance of Romantic irony, but, like his criticism itself, rather an ironical statement of Romanticism. This time around, however, my approach to the tale will be more scholarly than in the first chapter. First, I will discuss what I regard as the most relevant solutions critics have proposed for the mysteries of the tale. This has not been attempted in the first chapter, in which my purpose has been to present, as clearly and simply as possible, my own solution. I felt that the side-arguments the discussion of the most relevant scholarship inevitably entail would obscure my argument by adding confusion to an already perplexing problem. I will now attempt to make up for this omission. I have also sacrificed some details in the plot for clarity, which I will analyse now, along with the interpretations of other critics.

I will also attempt a more comprehensive analysis of Poe's sources than was required for the purposes of my first chapter. There, my aim has been to show that "Ligeia" was a femicide story. Here, I will use it as an illustration of Poe's conception of the "imaginative" work of art. My principal concern, therefore, will be articulating his critical statements with his practice, and, in order to understand his method, as opposed to his narrator's method, one must first trace his buried allusions to the sources of the tale. His handling of these sources is such that, in describing the meaningful connection his text establishes with them, one inevitably ends up clarifying some of the most mysterious details of the story. Thus, these two lines of argument will enable us, I think, to get at a more comprehensive view of Poe's complex plot.

I have before maintained that the mechanism of semantic camouflage that allows Poe to conceal, and yet at the same time ensure, the ultimate discovery of the femicide, which is the form Poe's particular brand of irony takes in "Ligeia," is the basic premise of the tale, which I regard as a "mystery" in the special sense Susan Amper gives to the term: "it is axiomatic that a mystery must provide means for its solution, or more generally, that texts must provide the means for their construction" ("Masters of Deceit" 59). This definition articulates the same conception of the mystery as a virtuosic display of the author's mastery in constructing a plot that we have seen in Poe's reviews of *Barnaby Rudge*.

Although his ideas on the subject are scattered throughout many different texts, owing to the haphazard nature of his journalistic criticism, Poe is remarkably consistent. Item six (in Pollin's numbering) of his "Chapter of Suggestions," published in *The Opal* in 1845, contains perhaps his most straightforward definition of plot, but this is only a systematisation of ideas that had been implied in his criticism at least since his reviews of *Barnaby Rudge*:

Where *plot* forms a portion of the contemplated interest, too much preconsideration cannot be had. *Plot* is very imperfectly understood, and has never been rightly defined. Many persons regard it as mere complexity of incident. In its most rigorous

acceptation, it is that *from which no component atom can be removed, and in which none of the component atoms can be displaced, without ruin to the whole*; and although a sufficiently good plot may be constructed, without attention to the whole rigor of this definition, still it is the definition which the true artist should always keep in view, and always endeavor to consummate in his works.

(Poe, *Brevities* 1:469)

Evidently, this is a declaration of artistic principle. Poe had, of course, tried to create the most artistic plots, that is, he had tried to make them as consistent as humanly possible. However, he also tells us that plot had “never been rightly defined,” thus, in effect, he once again claims priority for his approach to fiction. A writer could, Poe grants, get by without a consistent plot, especially when it was not an important part of the “contemplated interest.” Plot, however, as Poe understood it, formed the principal interest of the mystery story, as he himself had made very clear before. For, unlike other writers of fiction, the mystery writer was absolutely required to be consistent. He defines the mystery as a form of fiction where the reader has to guess the *dénouement*; without plot the *dénouement* would not be strictly a consequence of the text, therefore, many conceivable solutions, each equally valid, could be arrived at and, if this was so, in Poe’s terms, the mystery would be no mystery at all.

Poe’s notions of plot and of mystery are, therefore, intimately connected, and inseparable. This relationship, incidentally, is indicated in the *Marginalia* article by his presenting Dickens as an example of an author who was “totally deficient in constructiveness:” “His ‘Barnaby Rudge’ shows not the least ability to adapt” (Poe, *Brevities* 469). Thus, since a well-constructed plot was the mark of the true artist, and the mystery the form that absolutely required it, it follows that for Poe it was the most artistic form of fiction, or, at least, that in which an author could display his “constructiveness,” hence his artistry, the most effectively.

Later, in *Eureka* (1849), Poe restated his rigorous conception of plot—indeed, *Eureka* is arguably an extended meditation on Poe’s concept of plot:

Had an end [to the universe] been demonstrated, however, from so purely collateral a cause as an ether, Man’s instinct of the divine *capacity to adapt*, would have rebelled against the demonstration. We should have been forced to regard the Universe with some such sense of dissatisfaction as we experience in contemplating an unnecessarily complex work of human art. Creation would have affected us as an imperfect *plot* in a romance, where the *dénoûement* is awkwardly brought about by interposed incidents external and foreign to the main subject; instead of springing out of the bosom of the thesis—out of the heart of the ruling idea—instead of arising as a result of the primary proposition—as inseparable and inevitable part and parcel of the fundamental conception of the book. (Poe, *Eureka* 99)

As I see it, such declarations provide theoretical support for Susan Amper’s claim that: “The narrator’s statements [in a mystery story such as “Ligeia”] should (...) refer to *something*, which it should be possible for us to guess” (“Masters of Deceit” 59). In other words, it should be possible for the reader to make sense of the tale, that is, to form a clear, distinct picture of its story, reducing it to an intelligible chain of causality, thus providing a satisfactory resolution for all the narrative threads that the author deliberately left unresolved.

Most critics of Poe’s work, however, have maintained that Poe’s “serious” tales simply could not be reduced to sense. This idea ties in with the widely accepted view, shared by admirers and detractors alike, that Poe was unintelligible, and, indeed, that he believed that poetry consisted in deliberately blocking meaning, in order to hint of an ungraspable, unintelligible absolute Truth. All this critical edifice, however, crumbles before the bedrock of ascertainable fact: the narrator’s shadow on Rowena’s floor, for example. I keep returning to this shadow because it appears to me that its importance cannot be overstated. It fits the description Poe had made of the perfect hint in

his review of *Barnaby Rudge*: although evident, this clue is so well camouflaged that it eludes the reader's attention completely on a first reading. Furthermore, unlike Dickens, Poe succeeds in the ruse without ascertaining falsehoods, either in his own person, or in the person of his narrator, which, as we have seen, he regarded as the only artistic way of deceiving the reader. Thus, Poe lives up to his own standard of artistry—which is precisely what most critics of his work thought he had never been able to do.

As Coleridge astutely remarked, sometimes a shadow is only a shadow. This particular shadow signals the split between the apparent story and the real story; between what the narrator thinks happened and what really happened. This split resolves into a clean-cut opposition between superstition and rationality, which topples the fiction of undecidability on which the current dominant reading of the tale, and indeed of Poe's entire literary production, is predicated. In the ghostly "drama," past and present, reality and dream become one; the vivid "reminiscences" of the deed the narrator wanted to conceal from the reader, the murder of Ligeia, are merged with the spectacle of Rowena's illness, death, and, finally, with the sight of her dead body. But the impression of simultaneity is evidently illusory.

The shadow is only the prelude. All over the fabric of the narrator's vision there are other seams, small inconsistencies, which mark, like the shadow, the intersection of reality and dreams, and these allow the reader to trace the vision entirely to the "effect of confused time" (Fisher, "Dickens and Poe" 14)<sup>62</sup>. As we pull the thread, the solutions to all the mysteries that haunt the narrator appear, and all those nagging obscurities and perplexing mysteries vanish before the picture into which they arrange themselves. No matter how "earnest" the narrator is, the question we must ask ourselves is whether the author permits him to be right, or, in other words, if his experience must be considered a legitimate insight into extra-rational supernal Truth. And Poe denies his

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<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV uses the expression in his article about the influence of Dickens's "A Madman's MS." on Poe's "Ligeia." His understanding, however, is that dream and reality are hopelessly confused in the Poe's tale. I discuss this question more fully below.

character that luxury in the most dramatic fashion. His narrator is simply confused, or mad, in the classic sense of losing the ability to distinguish mental pictures from reality.

Of course, the narrator questions the validity of such a distinction, at least in such “wonderful” circumstances as he saw himself involved in. Indeed, he tacitly challenges the reader to gainsay him; to play the detective and try to make sense of his story, implying that this endeavour is doomed to failure. Once one accepts his thesis, therefore, one has already granted one’s agreement to his fundamental assumption: that his experience is not just unexplained, but *unexplainable*. The narrator’s thesis, of course, is blatantly, shamelessly inconsistent, with itself and with the evidence he produces to support it, but the condition of its acceptance is precisely the exclusion of the possibility of verification by empirical test or internal consistency, and indeed the recognition that rational criteria of validity do not apply to such events as he reports.

In all fairness, he never said he would explain anything. He proposed to *show* us, instead, that there was nothing to explain, and, we must take his suggestions on his own terms or not at all. We agree, then, while under his spell, not to undertake the effort required to make sense of each of the apparent wonders (the shadow, the drops, the wind, the hair rushing through the atmosphere, etc.). In this sense, the narrator’s “metaphysical” discourse, inasmuch as it discourages the reader from attempting to understand, arguably constitutes a part—perhaps the principal part—of the narrator’s cover. As Susan Amper points out, this determines the fundamental ambiguity of the tale: “the narrators” of Poe’s serious tales “themselves beckon us to sink into the wild and terrifying world of things incomprehensible, while the lapses in their narratives invite us to poke holes in their stories, and expose them as hacks, phonies and (...) worse” (“Masters of Deceit” 110).

Indeed, the narrator in “Ligeia” is wrong—there is no other way to put it. For there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for what he reports—he simply could not see it. He was a victim of delusion. I here employ this term in the sense in which it is used in modern psychiatry. Indeed, it is important to distinguish the narrator’s visions, including the shadow, the drops, the apparition of



Ligeia, and also the strange noises he mentions, from hallucination. According to the “Glossary of Technical Terms” included in *DSM-5*, hallucination is characterised by the absence of a “real” stimulus, whereas illusion consists is a “misperception or misinterpretation of a real external stimulus, such as hearing the rustling of leaves as the sound of voices” (American Psychiatric Association). This is obviously what happened to the narrator in the case of the shadow. The effects produced by the spectacle known as phantasmagoria, generally speaking, involve the same mechanism. Likewise, the “wonders” mentioned by the narrator can, more or less obviously, be traced to the “real” stimuli afforded by his phantasmagoria.

The narrator himself accurately states the real explanation of the supposed wonder that originally sent him on a ghost hunt, the shadow. This explanation corresponds to the literal meaning of his words, just like the secret of Egæus was the literal import of his. What the latter “saw” in the library were not teeth, but ideas; conversely, what the narrator of “Ligeia” saw on the floor was not seemingly, but actually a “shadow”—a shadow that, he says, “could be fancied for a shadow of a shade” (Poe, “Ligeia” 325). This is precisely what happened: he imagined the shadow was a “shadow of a shade,” because he did not perceive *he* was the substance of the shadow. We can always rely on a straight, literal reading of these narrators’ words to dissipate the confusion. Of course, in a sense, his shadow was a “shadow of a shade:” it was the shadow of that “great Shadow” that he tells us killed Ligeia, and whose presence is betrayed by the trail of death he leaves behind him. Yet, he misses the explanation a second time in his own text, as he writes it. His inability to acknowledge literal meaning, therefore, is a manifestation of the same peculiar blindness that prevented him from recognising what he saw in the first place.

In order to make the reader share the illusion; in order to make, that is, the reader misinterpret the evidence and overlook the literal meaning of the sentence that describes it like the narrator does, the author is required to perform a feat of literary sleight of hand, or misdirection. In theatrical magic, the object of which is to create an illusion, in the sense defined above, this term

denotes the practice of misleading the audience by drawing their attention away from the means by which that illusion is produced, or, to be more precise, by which the spectator is induced to misinterpret real stimuli. In a classic work in the field of modern magic theory, *Our Magic* (1911), Nevil Maskelyne and David Devant state that: “*Magic consists in creating, by misdirection of the senses, the mental impression of supernatural agency at work*” (176). The authors are careful to distinguish this technique from lying: “The misdirection which forms the groundwork of magic does not consist in telling lies, with the object of deceiving the spectator’s *intelligence*. It consists, admittedly, in misleading the spectator’s *senses*, in order to screen from detection certain details for which secrecy is required. It militates against the spectator’s faculties of observation, not against his understanding” (189). Maskelyne and Devant distinguish three kinds of misdirection: “distraction,” “disguise,” and “simulation.”

The ruses perpetrated by Poe in “Berenice” and “Ligeia,” and “phantasmagoric” effects in general, would fall on the latter category, which is thus defined: “Simulation is a form of pretence. In disguise, we have the principle of making one thing look like another and entirely different thing. In the misdirection of sense by means of simulation, we have the principle of giving apparent existence to things that do not exist, or presence to things that are absent” (Maskelyne and Devant 195). It appears to me that the concept of misdirection may be applied, more broadly, to the peculiar strain of irony that characterises most of Poe’s work.

Some mention must be made here of what has remained, for many years, the leading theory of Poe’s irony, developed by G. R. Thompson, who attempted to reconcile the irony of Poe’s serious tales, and the evident unreliability of his narrators with Romantic idealism. “When the satirist makes use of irony,” he writes, “he pretends to take his opponents seriously, accepting their premises and values and methods of reasoning in order eventually to expose their absurdity” (*Poe’s Fiction* 9). But, according to Thompson, this was not what Poe was trying to do in his so-called serious work. His was a different variety of irony, which Thompson terms “Romantic irony,” and

which he thought Poe had learned from German Romantic idealists, particularly the brothers Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel. For Thompson, then, Poe was “[a]t once a Romantic idealist devoted to ‘transcendental’ vision and yet also a satirist;” or “a skeptical ironist at the same time that he was a Romantic, an idealist, and even a mystic” (Thompson, *Poe’s Fiction* xi, 11-12). The argument is that Poe had “borrowed,” among other things, a technique of “‘mystical’ indirection” and used it, as his German predecessors had done, to manifest his “belief in the illusiveness of truth, in human alienation from actuality, and in the ‘one-sidedness’ of all serious statements” (34). In other words, Poe was only pretending to deride the “transcendentalism” he thought could only be enforced through “indirection,” that hinting of intelligible meaning when none was viable.

The aim of Poe’s irony, then, was to lead the reader to realise not that his ostensibly Romantic narrator was wrong, but rather the general futility of any attempt to make sense of an absurd world. Indeed, Thompson depicts Poe as a sort of existentialist *avant la lettre*. As regards Poe’s fiction, the critic concedes that the narrator of tales like “Ligeia” is absurd, but the point Thompson believes Poe was trying to make was that the absurdities of his leading man were no less absurd than any other attempt to make sense of “an ultimately incomprehensible, disconnected, absurd, or at best probably decaying and possibly malevolent universe” (*Poe’s Fiction* 13).

According to this view, in “Ligeia” Poe had appealed to the explained supernatural only to ridicule not only the explanations of apparently supernatural phenomena, but any attempts to explain anything: “his Gothic mode is that of the ambiguously explained supernatural, in which clues to the real psychological action are patterned much like those of a detective story. Moreover, we shall see that the vision of the human mind that emerges from this complex of literary technique and philosophy is one of despair over the ability of the mind to know anything” (Thompson, *Poe’s Fiction* 69). The key words in this passage are “ambiguously” and “psychological,” which qualify Thompson’s statement that the tales should be read as detective stories. Thompson tells us, then,

that, unlike Radcliffe's, Poe's explained supernatural is "ambiguous," that is, that the explanations brought out by analysis are never enough to rule out supernatural agency, thus effectually implying that they are only pseudo-explanations.<sup>63</sup> Secondly, he implies that these explanations are strictly "psychological," meaning that, despite the narrator being obviously deluded, the actual events in the tale are irretrievably unsettled, in the sense that the reader is supposed not to be able to decide at any given point what is real and what is hallucination. In other words, Thompson tells us nothing at all may have really and actually happened; that the narrator may have hallucinated the whole thing. But this is evidently contradicted by the text, for the shadow and the phantasmagoria were certainly real. In effect, Thompson uses the detective as a metaphor for an approach to the tale that presupposes the unviability of any natural explanation and is, in fact, the exact opposite of actual detective work, and of the kind of approach illustrated in Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Auguste C. Dupin. Thompson, in short, supposes that Poe's narrator was not wrong, and that the idea was to lead the reader to come to accept that we can never be *right* about anything.

This view pivots on the idea that there are two "levels" of interpretation in the tale, none of which prevails over the other:

This primary structure is the objective synthesis generated by our perceiving the double aspects of the tale as simultaneously supernaturalistic (symbolic of deep structures in the human mind or not) and yet also realistic in a conventional sense. This multiple perception of the simultaneous or parallel levels of the tale derives principally from our perception of the subjectivity of the narrator. (...) in 'Ligeia,' we experience a series of 'supernatural' events (...) through the mind of a narrator whom we recognize as disturbed—so that we simultaneously are subjectively involved in and detached from these experiences. The whole system of interpenetrating levels or structures (...) leads ultimately to Poe's ironic mockery of the ability of the human

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63 As the following makes clear: "In their intricacy of design, Poe's Gothic tales contain tell-tale evidences for rational psychological explanation, yet rarely so obtrusive as to destroy the uncanny supernatural effect" (Thompson, *Poe's Fiction* 77).

mind ever to know anything with certainty, whether about the external reality of the world or about the internal reality of the mind. (Thompson, *Poe's Fiction* 89)

The problem with the foregoing theory is that it ignores the clues that prove conclusively that the narrator is misconstruing reality. Therefore, what Thompson describes as a technique of Romantic indirection, designed to demonstrate the impossibility of knowing anything with any degree of certainty, is in fact a technique of misdirection, designed to lead the reader away from the truth about Ligeia. The shadow on the floor is an actuality. There is no ambiguity there. It evidently belongs to the narrator. With his narrator's mistake, Poe effectively demonstrates that some statements about reality are valid, and others false, and this flatly contradicts Thompson's claim that he meant to show his reader that *nothing* could be known. The facts in "Ligeia" are skillfully obfuscated by a distinctly Romantic rhetoric that, by inviting generalization, makes the reader overlook the literal meaning of the narrator's statements.

Thus, Thompson's response is still very much determined by Poe's text, but only in the sense that he fell into Poe's "Romantic" trap. Indeed, the chief reason why most readers, Thompson included, agree to the narrator's terms is the fact that, though his yarn may be incredible, the opinions he expresses in all earnestness are perfectly convincing. That is, he expresses beliefs one assumes a poet of the first half of the nineteenth century might endorse. By suggesting that the most important truths, or more precisely, that all-important total and absolute Truth which true poets were supposed to convey through "indirection," Romanticism promoted the view, which still obtains today, that poetry is strictly incomprehensible, hence that all attempts to understand it are futile and misguided. Indirectly, of course, this implied the idea that that *all* attempts to understand the world are, in a sense, themselves futile, inasmuch as the whole, total Truth could not be grasped intellectually, but only obscurely intimated through a certain kind of poetry, based on "indirection."

In practice, Romanticism encouraged readers to mistrust, and even to ignore literal meanings. This is precisely the function the narrator's Romanticism performs in the tale. Readers

have indeed overlooked its intelligible meaning. And, since it has generally been thought that the *dénouement* is not only unstated, but inexistent, the tale has been regarded, for all practical purposes, as open-ended, and this has always formed a stimulus for symbolical interpretations. The meaning of such a tale, it was thought, was not precisely coded in the text; it *had* to be meditated, as it were, by the extra-rational, analogical thought and the kind of emotional engagement with its mystery illustrated by the narrator's "circle of analogies" (Poe, "Ligeia" 314). Indeed, expressing himself in the mystical mode typical of Romanticism, he tells us that "subsequently to the period when Ligeia's beauty passed into my spirit, there dwelling as in a shrine, I derived from many existences in the material world, a sentiment such as I felt always aroused within me by her large and luminous orbs" (314). Thompson supposed Poe meant his readers to follow in his narrator's steps, and embrace the awful transcendence of Ligeia's eyes.

Under Romanticism, the poet was no longer, or not necessarily, someone who wrote poems. "Poet" became a byword for the "creative" mind, that is, the intuitive mind which could glimpse synthetic truths that were beyond the reach of "narrow" analytical reasoning. Thus understood, the poet was not a craftsman, or artist, but a medium: a peculiarly sensitive individual—a man, according to most descriptions—which was able to establish an incomplete and transient transit between this physical existence and the great beyond, the world of Supernal Truth and Beauty, and who embodied his unintelligible and intransitive experience in a creation (not necessarily a poem) which had the power to induce a similar trance on a receptive subject.

Thus, Romanticism replaced the Augustan ideal of perspicuity with a distinctly mystical cult of vagueness and sensibility. The Augustans had despised obscurity, and believed that even emotions could be understood, or at least that an effort should be made to understand them. On the contrary, the Romantics, generally speaking, mistrusted the understanding, and in particular its ability to capture what they regarded as the essence of human experience, and had, therefore, a corresponding contempt for particular truths—that is for plain meaning. True poetry bypassed the

understanding, as it were, and was supposed to excite the Imagination, inducing transcendent, shared intuitions, that exceeded local meanings, historical contingencies, and definite forms, propelling the mind of the reader into the realm of abstract, ideal Truth and Beauty. Therefore, the Romantic outlook rejected the modalities of thought grounded in logic, favouring instead analogical thinking. In this sense, then, Poe's narrator is typically Romantic.

Romanticism, especially in the peculiar form it acquired in the United States known as Transcendentalism, as we have seen, also taught readers to expect a "meaning" beyond meaning. In this sense, Romantic poetry was not conceived so much as the vehicle of meaning, but as a promise of an absolute truth, which could never be understood, or even expressed, but only vaguely intimated. This transcendental "meaning" was the unrealised, unattainable unity of the individual mind and the universe. Although it could not be attained, this identification with the universe was glimpsed by the poet, which thus became, as it were, the analogue of God. In fact, the Romantic attitude develops, somewhat paradoxically, from the perception that all meaning is relative—to a set of notions, to a shared experience, or to some circumscribed aspect of reality. The Romantic poet rebels against this relativity, as it were, by rejecting, in theory at least, intelligible meaning. Thus understood, poetry was a mystical re-enactment of the divine act of creation, and therefore fundamentally unintelligible.

Thus, in practice, Romanticism replaced meaning with the promise of a "meaning" which was not really a meaning, as it could never be grasped. To experience the incomprehensible universal Truth that was thought to be indirectly represented by poetry through a technique of "indirection"—as Thompson calls it—that renders all definite meaning impossible, one needed the "broader" perspective of transcendent intuition. True "meaning" (in the idealist vocabulary Thompson employs, the word is a metaphor) then, was not expressed—it was not *meant*—but rather presupposed; it was not contained in or by the text, but beyond, or behind it.

Hence arose the common perception that “mere” intellect was not enough to get, for lack of a better word, the essence of poetry, and the complementary notion that the poet himself had very little conscious control over his material. Therefore, Romanticism did not conceive of the poet as an artist, in the aristotelian sense of the word. At the same time, poetry was no longer seen primarily as the expression of thought, but rather as an experience, that was “felt” rather than grasped by the intellect. Thus, poetry became a touchstone for readers. If one thought, or rather “felt,” one could understand it, this could only mean that one had not been able to get past the “literal” level, and consequently, that one lacked sensibility. These notions are the background and the spring of the rhetoric of the narrator of “Ligeia.”

Because these notions were mostly taken for granted in Poe’s time, we have, in ours, assumed Poe’s Romanticism as a matter of course—we may term this attitude historical determinism. Thus, Yvor Winters wrote that Poe “was largely formed by the same influences that formed other men, both better and worse, Coleridge as well as Chivers;”<sup>64</sup> (“Edgar Allan Poe” 260). This is the idea most critics still have of Poe. He was a Romantic by influence—he had to be—, but his psychological idiosyncrasies, which bordered on insanity, made him go too far. For Winters, Poe’s work had no artistic value, but only a “clinical value [that] resides in the fact that as a specimen of late romantic theory and practice he is at once extreme and typical” (260).

Poe’s earnest narrator was then considered, and still is by most critics, the embodiment of Poe’s ideal of the poet. And so, the “transcendentalism” of his narrator, although it represents exactly the stance that Poe systematically contested, and even ridiculed in his criticism, was attributed to him. Although some other hoaxes contributed to set this critical dogma in place, I believe that this portrayal is derived chiefly from “Ligeia” and “Morella.” Specifically, the common representation of Poe the poet results from a straight reading of these tales as allegories of the quest of the Romantic poet for unattainable ideal Truth and Beauty. In great measure, indeed, Poe is

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64 Poe’s friend Thomas Holley Chivers (1809-1858).



regarded as a “transcendentalist” *because* “transcendentalism” is endorsed by his narrator, and despite his criticism. If we were speaking of any other author but Poe, the contradiction between the opinions expressed by the author and the opinions of his character would be taken as an indication of satire. But Poe is special—in fact, he has been regarded as positively singular.

The paradoxical notion that Poe did not *mean* what he actually expressed, and did not express what he really “meant” has long become an article of faith in Poe’s studies. While conventional Romantics intimated the insufficiency of meaning and sought to block it and destabilise it in their works, Poe went too far, crossing over the into the realm of nonsense. Winters, although he never suspected Poe of being insincere—because all Romantics were sincere, and Poe had to be, and certainly *appeared* a Romantic—, clearly saw that Poe made no sense at all. In fact, Winters thought that Poe had simply decided to stop making sense. Unlike conventional, moderate Romantics, then, Poe “endeavors as far as may be to escape from a paraphrasable theme; he recognizes no obligation to understand the meaning of the theme from which he cannot escape—in fact, he seems to recognize an obligation not to understand it” (Winters, “Edgar Allan Poe” 244). Meanwhile, Winters suggests that Poe was an uneducated writer with a plebeian taste: he *could* not write accurately and precisely, and his opinions on poetry were rationalisations of his own shortcomings.

This irritated Winters. Besides, he regarded Poe as a deluded mystic, and this irritated him even further. For Winters had a genuine admiration for mysticism. He sought to distinguish the true and sincere mysticism of writers like Very and Emily Dickinson, who sincerely “seek to understand” and fail, from what he regards as the misguided imitations of true mysticism of Poe, who “seeks a justification for refusing to understand” (Winters, “Edgar Allan Poe” 245). Supposedly, Poe’s theory of poetry is that justification. Here is how Winters paraphrased it:

the subject matter of poetry, properly considered, is by definition incomprehensible and unattainable; the poet, in dealing with something else, toward which he has no

intellectual or moral responsibilities whatever (...) should merely endeavor to *suggest that a higher meaning exists*—in other words, should endeavor to suggest the presence of a meaning when he is aware of none. The poet has only to write a good description of something physically impressive, with an air of mystery, an air of meaning concealed. (245)

But the attitude Winters so accurately describes is, as he himself indirectly admits, a potential development of those very “romantic notions” everyone was supposed to share—although no one would seriously think of taking Romanticism *that* far. He thought that Poe’s theory was absurd, and that it determined the absurdities of expression of which he found so many examples in Poe. He impatiently remarks that “it is a matter for astonishment that mature men can be found to take this kind of thing seriously” (Winters, “Edgar Allan Poe” 258-59). The irony is that Winters himself did not realise the importance of his insight. This stuff was not meant to be taken seriously. Romanticism told us that “mere” understanding was not enough—Poe tells us that, in order to share the ineffable transcendent experience of the Romantic poet, one must not think at all. In fact, and this is another irony, one suspects Winters meant to criticise through Poe Romanticism itself, and particularly the form it assumed in the United States. Winters implies that Poe’s project was fundamentally akin to that of Emerson and what is known as “American Transcendentalism,” which Winters regarded as a perversion of what he regarded as the “true” understanding of poetry, that had developed from the spirit of Coleridge. Indeed, he thought that Coleridge, despite being influenced by the same spirit that produced Chivers was still a poet, because he was still striving to understand poetry. Chivers, he implies, was too far gone—and so, he thought, was Poe, which Winters thought perfectly illustrated the consequences of taking Romantic too seriously.<sup>65</sup>

But no reasonable person could take “transcendentalism” to such obviously absurd extremes—unless, of course, that person meant to ridicule it. The animus of Poe’s extreme Romantic

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65 For a discussion of the New Critics mostly negative response to Poe, see Gato, “Edgar Allan Poe” 157-59.

statements, therefore, appears to have been akin to that which underlies Winters's criticism, with the difference that Poe expressed his critique through satire. Yet, despite widely varying estimates of Poe's literary merits, the critical consensus has always been that Poe's "transcendentalism" was sincere, and so most critics have focused on accommodating Poe's practice with the opinions he ostensibly rejected. The first one to really break this consensus was Susan Amper. In the chapter of her dissertation dedicated to "The Fall of the House of Usher," commenting the widely-held critical conception, promoted by T. S. Eliot, "that Poe had an immature mind, that he merely entertained ideas, without integrating them into a consistent belief system," she remarks that: "The complaint is valid, providing one adopts certain assumptions about intellectual maturity and art. It is equally valid, however, and perhaps more stimulating, to consider how that which seems immature or jarring in Poe may reflect a different set of assumptions or purposes" (Amper, "Masters of Deceit" 148). She is, of course, merely stating a rule of sound criticism, which is in blatant contradiction with the unstated rule of mainstream criticism of Poe's work: if ever Poe made any sense, we should disregard it; Poe's characters do not even try to make sense, therefore should be regarded as mouthpieces of the author.

An extreme illustration of this attitude is Floyd Stovall's reading of a passage of Poe's article on his former associate N. P. Willis, published in the *Broadway Journal* in January 18, 1845, in which Poe denies the quintessentially Romantic distinction between the "reproductive" Fancy and the "creative" Imagination. "'Fancy,' says the author of 'Aids to Reflection' (who aided Reflection to much better purpose in his 'Genevieve')— 'Fancy combines—Imagination creates.' This was intended," Poe remarks, "and has been received, as a distinction; but it is a distinction without a difference—without even a difference of degree. The Fancy as nearly creates as the Imagination, and neither at all" ("American Prose Writers," 16).<sup>66</sup> In many other instances, Poe had insisted,

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<sup>66</sup> The passages I here quote from Poe's article on N. P. Willis are slightly altered from Poe's January 1840 review of Thomas Moore's *Alciphron, A Poem*, where the quotation from Coleridge is more precisely identified: "says the author of the 'Auncient Mariner,' in his *Biographia Literaria*" (334).

Poe would twice quote his own discussion of fancy and imagination, first in the N. P. Willis article in his review of Thomas Hood's *Prose and Verse*, published in the *Broadway Journal* for August 9, 1845, portions of

against the predominant Romantic values, that art consisted in the “combination” of existing elements—themselves combinations of pre-existing materials—into a harmonious whole, thus openly challenging the prevailing conception of poetry as the precarious embodiment of “transcendent” insights. In fact, Poe reduced to naught the theoretical ground on which the Romantic myths of inspiration and originality rested.

But Poe, we are told, is special. Stovall flatly asserts that he and Coleridge “differ, or seem to differ, in one point only: the meaning of the word ‘create.’ (...) in reality, Poe means by combination exactly what Coleridge means by creation” (“Poe’s Debt” 794). In other words, Poe did not *mean* what *he* said—he “meant” what *Coleridge* said. Thus, the suggestiveness of his language is suffered to prevail over his meaning, which we are constantly instructed to disregard. But this suggestiveness itself is, I think, an example of the sort of misdirection which he had so dexterously used in his tales. Through it, Poe manages to *appear* Romantic even while rejecting Coleridge’s theory.

The influence of Coleridge on Poe’s theory of fiction and poetry is, incidentally, indisputable. He paraphrased the definition of poetry given in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) in his first published critical essay, the preface to the *Poems* of 1831; Poe evidently derived his conception of imagination as the faculty that allows the artist to combine his materials into an harmonious, consistent whole, as well as his psychological theory of reader’s response from Coleridge. In fact, the influence of this author on Poe’s critical and theoretical pronouncements is so palpable, and so well-documented, that it would be superfluous to argue the point here. Incidentally, it appears to me that Poe got from Coleridge many of the ideas Thompson attributes to the direct influence of the German Romantic idealists mentioned in “Morella,” Schelling, Fichte, and the brothers Schlegel. After all, Coleridge, unlike Poe, was an accomplished Germanist whose debt to those authors, not to mention Kant, was already well-known in Poe’s time.

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which are discussed below, and then in an installment (number 220 in Pollin’s edition) of his *Marginalia* series published in May 1849 in the *Southern Literary Messenger* shortly before his death.

Coleridge attempted to reconcile empiricism and associationism with transcendentalism. Hartley's mechanical laws of association explained the fancy, he thought, but not the imagination, which represented a sort of loophole that safeguarded the possibility of transcendent, quasi-religious intuition. Not surprisingly, Coleridge maintained that the best poetry could not be precisely understood and strove, in his own poetry, to keep the reader in a sort of epistemological suspense. "I can understand," Coleridge said,

and allow for an effort of the mind, when it would describe what it cannot satisfy itself with the description of, to reconcile opposites and qualify contradictions, leaving a middle state of mind more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other, when it is, as it were, hovering between images. As soon as it is fixed on one image, it becomes understanding; but while it is unfixed and wavering between them, attaching itself permanently to none, it is imagination. (*Lectures* 495)<sup>67</sup>

This effect, then, is precisely what Wilbur, Thompson, Stovall, and many others, thought Poe was trying to achieve in his serious tales and poems. They also supposed that Poe had, like Coleridge, regarded the depiction of supernatural "incidents and agents" as the peculiar province of the imagination. In writing the supernatural narratives included in *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge had sought to "transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment that constitutes poetic faith" (*Biographia Literaria* 2: 6). This idea implies, of course, that "poetic faith" had the same relationship with real faith as the "secondary imagination" had with the "primary:" "The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the finite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former" (2:304).

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<sup>67</sup> This comes from John Payne Collier's 1856 reconstruction of the text of the last of seven lectures Coleridge gave on Shakespeare and Milton in 1811-1812. The modern editor, R. A. Foakes, remarks that the text "is a radically revised version of the notes he took at the lectures," and therefore, must not be regarded as authoritative. In any case, the passage in question is certainly representative of Coleridge's thought, and, as such, is quoted by Engell and Bates in a footnote to Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria* (see 301n2).

In managing the supernatural, that is, strictly inexplicable subjects which Coleridge terms “shadows of imagination,” then, the writer should take care to maintain a special kind of verisimilitude. In the chapter of the *Biographia* dedicated to the “Defects of Wordsworth’s Poetry,” Coleridge offers some practical explanation of his approach: “That *illusion*, contradistinguished from *delusion*, that *negative* faith, which simply permits the images presented to work by their own force, without either denial or affirmation of their real existence by the judgment, is rendered impossible by their immediate neighbourhood to words and facts of known and absolute truth” (2:134). The error consisted, according to Coleridge, in calling the reader’s beliefs to task, thus allowing them to “*put out*” the “mere poetic Analogon of faith,” that is, “poetic faith,” and causing “[w]hat would otherwise have been yielded to as a pleasing fiction” to be “repelled as revolting falsehood” (2:134).

In “Ligeia,” Poe quite deliberately did exactly what Coleridge advised writers of supernatural stories never to do. By placing his “shadows” in the vicinity of indisputable truths, he forced readers to reject them as falsehoods. Thus, tales like “Morella,” “Berenice,” and “Ligeia” do not feature actual supernatural events, but only phantasmagoric effects which are confused with actual supernatural manifestations by the protagonist-narrators. In fact, one might say that this sort of confusion is the covert theme of most of his fiction. But, the fact that the tales masquerade as tales of the supernatural, corrodes Coleridge’s distinction between “*illusion*” and “*delusion*.” For, in a sense, the reader who does not recognise the facts that force us to reject the narrator’s “thesis” are themselves, in a sense, deluded, as it were, by proxy, and this was an effect Poe took great pains to achieve, and which can only be realised through misdirection. Thus, unlike poems like “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Poe’s “Ligeia” is not really a story of the positive supernatural, but a story of delusion.

This is emblematic of Poe’s relationship with Coleridge. He accepted the acuteness of his intellectual analyses of literary processes, but rejected all his transcendental philosophy. This had

been clearly indicated in Poe's first published critical piece, the aforementioned "Letter to B——," to which I will return in the third chapter: "Of Coleridge I cannot speak but with reverence. His towering intellect! His gigantic power! (...) It is lamentable to think that such a mind should be buried in metaphysics" (10). In that same article, Poe also famously argued that the object of poetry was not truth, thus implying from the outset that its object was to convey a false impression of "transcendence." Accordingly, what he rejected specifically in Coleridge was the idea that the imagination differed essentially from the fancy, and consequently, that the "shadows of the imagination" mentioned by Coleridge had any transcendental value. And then, faithful to his theory, he set out to create "transcendental" hoaxes that illustrated the dangers of being, as he put it, "buried in metaphysics."

The belief that Poe shared his narrator's convictions and condoned his methods is predicated on the supposition that the experience he, the narrator, relates is an authentic instance of the *unexplainable*; that it admits no straightforward, coherent explanation, and therefore was intended by Poe as a representation of the experience of the "imaginative" Romantic poet, as Coleridge conceived it. The viability of such an explanation, on the other hand, exposes the narrator to ridicule, disfranchising him along with the views he represents. One thing is to probe the unexplainable, to go one step beyond this physical existence; but it is an altogether different thing to overlook the simple explanation of trivial phenomena to embark in pseudo-metaphysical speculation.

This is not to say that Poe did not intend to elicit a "transcendentalist" response, and to induce people to trust his Romanticism. On the contrary, he counted on it. By a few well-placed Romantic cues, Poe induces his reader to demonstrate performatively that a public who does not expect to understand and hopes for something other than meaning is bound to miss the most superficial explanations, and therefore makes an easy target for humbugs like Poe's narrator. Thus, he intimates that Coleridge's method, or rather the theory that supported it, had the potential to

create not only pleasing illusions, as that writer reassuringly maintained, but actual delusion, such as the narrator of “Ligeia” experiences. Inasmuch as it corroded the faith in rational inquiry, and replaced it with intuition, Coleridge’s “metaphysicianism,” and other similar theories, created an intellectual climate in which deliriums could pass for legitimate intuitions. Poe evidently thought, therefore, that the obscurantism of which Winters accuses him was the inevitable result of those very “essential Romantic notions” he had deliberately stretched to absurdity (Winters, “Edgar Allan Poe” 260).

Instead of stimulating the effort to understand, Romanticism rewarded incomprehension, thereby unintentionally empowering ignorance, illiteracy, and arrogance—empowering, that is, people like Poe’s narrator. This, I believe, is the point Poe was trying to make in “Ligeia,” and also in his criticism. Of course, “metaphysicianism” were combined in Coleridge with habits of rigorous logical thinking and a healthy dose of scepticism. As we have seen, he was dismissive of common ghost lore and very much aware of the distinction between hallucinations and shadows. But Poe implies through his tales that he could only deny the mystical value of such experiments at the expense of consistency. Indeed, as Winters himself recognises, the theory of Poe’s narrator, despite its extremism, is typically Romantic.

This is the true significance of the shadow. Its true meaning finally severs the bond between Poe and his narrator that precious few have dared to question, showing conclusively that Poe did not endorse the “typical” Romanticism the former represents. This projection of himself was itself a false impression—a phantasm. The reader will probably receive the claim that such a delusion could resist critical scrutiny for over one and a half centuries with justified scepticism. Yet, the shadow, the evidence of an even more astounding oversight on the narrator’s part, is what can never be dismissed: it shows us that Poe himself promoted the error of his readers. Thus, this seemingly trivial evidence shakes the foundations on which Poe’s scholarship was built. Whenever someone felt inclined to dismiss the theoretical phantasm of Poe’s mad mysticism, “Ligeia,” or more



precisely, that intriguing “angelic” shadow, appeared to pose an insurmountable obstacle; conversely, the supposed mysticism of Poe’s criticism prevented us from questioning the idea that the shadow was a sign of Ligeia’s “transcendent” presence. Yet, both are decoys. The unrealised catastrophe of Poe’s apparently incomplete tale is the debunking, by the reader, of the narrator’s pretensions to intuitive “metaphysical” knowledge. In short, “Ligeia” is not designed to demonstrate the futility of human statements, but rather the absurdity of pretensions to any but relative truths—which, of course, is a strictly rationalist point.

The narrator was a victim of suggestion, and was then able to pass on his delusion by a process that is a caricature of the communication of intuitions that some poets we usually group under the heading of Romanticism thought was involved in poetry. That is, he is able to produce on the unsuspecting reader an effect that is the poetical analogue of that which the “phantasmagoria” had produced on him. This poetical effect, of course, is similar to that Coleridge hoped to produce with his treatment of supernatural subjects, for he too hoped that the reader might suspend reasonable doubt, and adhere, if only temporarily, to the illusion. But, in Coleridge’s supernatural romances, it is impossible to decide whether the characters were deluded.

In “Ligeia,” the situation is very different. The narrator demonstrably confuses his phantasmagoric tricks with real magic. It is no coincidence that this is more or less what Winters thought had happened to Poe. Through his extreme formalism, he thought, Poe communicated the impression that poetry was the verbal equivalent of sleight of hand, but appeared to have confused the illusion he had artificially created by his misguided attempts of imitating his supposed Romantic masters with the real deal. For this critic believes that there is indeed a sort of magical quality in true mystical poetry; he has faith in its ability to embody a sort of intuition that, in a sense, transcends the understanding. These are qualities he does not recognise in Poe’s poetry, who, he thought, had no feeling for poetry, and this because he was no longer making an attempt to

understand it. He might be right, but that is wholly beside the point. The point, I think, is that Poe had no sympathy for the kind of poetry that Winters preferred.

The very characteristics that have led most critics to identify Poe's narrator as a typical representative of the Romantic myth of the poet, once his delusion is revealed, show that Poe never had any faith in the Romantic method. Therefore, the contradiction between his theory and practice is only apparent. Indeed, in his criticism he consistently rejected the Romantic distinction between true intuitive poetry, and false artificial pseudo-poetry. For Poe, all poetry was artificial, that is, art.

In fact, Poe implies that the typical Romantic poet was confusing art with magic. And, just as in his fiction he ridicules the expectation of intuitive "poetic" knowledge, Poe also denied in his criticism the crucial distinction that supported it, between the "creative" imagination and the "reproductive" fancy. For him, truly "imaginative" works were those that gave the reader the impression that the obvious meaning was not all there was to them. With this definition Poe naturalises the concept of imagination, and by implication, mysticism itself:

The truth is that the just distinction between the fancy and the imagination (and which is still but a distinction *of degree*) is involved in the consideration of the *mystic*. We give this as an idea of our own, altogether. We have no authority for our opinion — but do not the less firmly hold it. The term *mystic* is here employed in the sense of Augustus William Schlegel, and of most other German critics. It is applied by them to that class of composition in which there lies beneath the transparent upper current of meaning, an under or *suggestive* one. What we vaguely term the *moral* of any sentiment is its mystic or secondary expression. It has the vast force of an accompaniment in music. This vivifies the air; that spiritualizes the *fanciful* conception, and lifts it into the *ideal*. (Poe, Rev. of *Alciphron* 337)

As we have seen, G. R. Thompson contended that Poe used the sort of Romantic irony that Raymond Immerwahr defined as follows: "The Romantic Ironist 'does not mean simply the

opposite of what he says’; instead, ‘he is likely to mean at the same time both what he seems to be saying *and* its opposite’” (qtd. in Thompson, *Poe’s Fiction* 21). Thompson maintains that Poe had derived his understanding of irony specifically from Friedrich Schlegel, who, “[a]round 1800, (...) had conjoined the terms *irony* and *transcendentalism*. Irony was the process of transcending both the illusions of the world and the delusions of one’s own limited mind. Such transcendence of the visible world and of the self was, for Schlegel, achieved through a sense of the comic and the absurd in the serious” (Thompson, *Poe’s Fiction* 27). Thompson supposes that Poe got Friedrich’s ideas chiefly from his brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel. Yet, although Poe mentions his name in his writings several times, the definition of “the mystic” I quote above is the only specific reference Poe ever made to the writings of the brothers Schlegel.

But this reference is more than a little mischievous. Poe’s definition of “the mystic” does not presuppose “Romantic irony,” or any kind of transcendence for that matter, for he does not qualify the ulterior meaning to be conveyed. Thus, in effect, and according to this definition, all irony is “mystic,” that is, any work is “mystic” in which some half-concealed meaning can be glimpsed.

Poe then proceeds to state that all

those poems, or portions of poems, or those prose romances, which mankind have been accustomed to designate as *imaginative* (...) are remarkable for the *suggestive* character which we have discussed. They are strongly *mystic*—in the proper sense of the word. (...) With each note of the lyre is heard a ghostly, and not always a distinct, but an august and soul-exalting *echo*. In every glimpse of beauty presented, we catch, through long and wild vistas, dim bewildering visions of a far more ethereal beauty *beyond*. But not so in poems which the world has always persisted in terming *fanciful*. Here the upper current is often exceedingly brilliant and beautiful; but then men *feel* that this upper current *is all*. No Naiad voice addresses them *from below*.

The notes of the air of the song do not tremble with the according tones of the accompaniment. (Poe, Rev. of *Alciphron* 256)

In short, imaginative texts are distinguished by their “transparency.” They give the reader the sensation that something important lies beneath the surface. But the vision is “dim.” When this underlying idea can be clearly perceived, of course, the poem or romance is not truly imaginative. Poe was indeed suggesting, as Winters remarked, that a writer had only to write “with an air of meaning concealed.” But, in a passage like this, Poe does this with full deliberation. He effectively appeals, indeed, to the original etymological meaning of the word “mystic,” which did not necessarily involve transcendence, but only secrecy.

Incidentally, this is precisely how Poe describes the effect of Shelley’s fairy in *Queen Mab*, which he compares unfavourably with what he terms Drake’s “puerile abortion, ‘The Culprit Fay’” (Rev. of *Alciphron* 334). Drake’s fairy tale belonged to the “class of the pseudo-ideal,” whereas Shelley’s was truly ideal:

It will be seen that the fairy of Shelley is not a mere compound of incongruous natural objects, inartificially put together, unaccompanied by *any* moral sentiment—but a being, in the illustration of whose nature some physical elements are used collaterally as adjuncts, while the main conception springs immediately, *or thus apparently springs*, from the brain of the poet, enveloped in the moral sentiments of grace, of color, of motion—of the beautiful, of the *mystical*, of the august—in short, of the ideal.

(Poe, Rev. of *Alciphron* 336-37)

This has commonly been taken as an endorsement of Coleridge’s distinction, but this is a reading not borne out by the text. This passage makes it absolutely clear that the difference between the true and the false “ideal” is only a matter of *appearance*. Although *all* conceptions are “resoluble into the old,” Shelley was able to make it appear that his fairy was entirely original, hence,

an absolute, “ideal” creation. The keyword in this case is “inartificially.” Poe takes it for granted that Shelley’s “creation” was, just like Drake’s, a “compound of incongruous natural objects,” but the English poet had put them together “artificially” to convey the impression that no artifice had been involved. Thus, the impression of “inartificiality” is the mark of the highest art. In other words, true art conceals its nature, presenting as spontaneous what is in fact the product of careful elaboration.

Thus, the difference between the fancy and the imagination becomes not even a distinction of degree, but itself a matter of *seeming*: “We might make a distinction, *of degree*, between the fancy and the imagination, in saying that the latter is the former *loftily employed*. But experience proves this distinction to be unsatisfactory. What we *feel* and *know* to be fancy, will be found still only *fanciful*, whatever be the theme which engages it. (...) No *subject* exalts it into the ideal” (Poe, Rev. of *Alciphron* 334).

Poe’s analysis of Shelley illustrates his point. His poetry is *felt* to be truly imaginative not because it deals with any intrinsically ineffable subject. For Poe any idea, concrete or ideal, definite or indefinite, can be conveyed through suggestion. What distinguishes Shelley is the “*suggestive* character” of his poetry itself, which gives the reader the illusion of transcendence—that is, it makes the reader *feel* the presence of an idea *beyond* the text, which defies expression. The griffin is an evident compound of known creatures, and therefore illustrates “fanciful” combination. The reader cannot but decompose it into its constituent elements and, therefore, has no such feeling. Shelley, on the other hand, contrives to give his reader the impression that his fay is a spontaneous creation of his genius. Through his technique of suggestion, in other words, the poet makes the reader feel that he has intuitively transcended both the world of the senses and his own self, and hit on an entirely unprecedented idea by transcendent intuition.

Yet, for Poe this is an illusion studiously effected by the “imaginative” artist, as Poe would later make clear in his article on N. P. Willis:

in general, the richness or force of the matters combined—the facility of discovering combinable novelties worth combining—and the absolute ‘chemical combination’ and proportion of the completed mass—are the particulars to be regarded in our estimate of Imagination. It is this thorough harmony of an imaginative work which so often causes it to be undervalued by the indiscriminating, through the character of obviousness which is superinduced. We are apt to find ourselves asking “*why is it* that these combinations have never been imagined before?” (Poe, “American Prose Writers” 17).<sup>68</sup>

Poe once again emphasises that the fancy and the imagination both “combine” (Poe could not make this any more clear in this passage, where he employs the word and its cognates five times). He thought that the imagination combined known elements so harmoniously as to give the reader the impression that the novel combination is an absolute creation, that is, a radically unprecedented conception, which could never be decomposed. This impression reinforces, in turn, the perception that the poet transcended earthly reality. Indeed, according to Poe, the difference between the fancy and the imagination pertains solely to the mode in which such combinations are accomplished: the products of the first impress us as artificial, contrived; those of the latter appear natural, and even obvious. Still, Poe admits no miracles: “the wildest effort of the mind,” he had already told us, “cannot stand the test of the analysis” (Poe, “American Prose Writers” 16). Thus, originality itself becomes an effect, a ruse, rather than an intrinsic quality of the work of art. This purely technical definition of imagination, of course, deprives the term of the “transcendental” overtones with which Coleridge had invested it.

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68 This is one of the passages, to which I have already alluded, that Poe would later quote on two occasions: his review of Thomas Hood’s *Poetry and Prose*, and the *Marginalia*, M220, in Pollin’s edition. In his annotations to the latter, this critic remarks: “The passage here is seminal to Poe’s theory of aesthetics, with its inclusion of the grotesque; the chemical analogy does not serve to clarify” (Poe, *Brevities* 370). Pollin thus manifests the same perplexity that we have seen Stovall express regarding Poe’s discussion of the distinction between Fancy and Imagination. He too was convinced that Poe’s metaphor betrayed his true sense. On the contrary, the analogy, which is impossible be accommodate to Coleridge’s theory, is perfectly consonant with Poe’s meaning.

The article on Willis from which I have been quoting was published in the *Broadway Journal* in January 18, 1845. Poe's appraisal of Shelley in this article complements what he had said of him the previous week, on the second and last part of his review of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett's *The Drama of Exile*, where he had argued that Shelley, inasmuch as he did not understand his own method, was not an artist in the proper sense of the word:

If ever mortal 'wreaked his thoughts upon expression' it was Shelley. If ever poet sang (as a bird sings)—impulsively—earnestly—with utter abandonment—to himself solely—and for the mere joy of his own song—that poet was the author of the Sensitive Plant. Of Art—beyond that which is the inalienable instinct of Genius—he either had little or disdained all. He *really* disdained that Rule which is the emanation from Law, because his own soul was law in itself. (...) With such a man, to imitate was out of the question; it would have answered no purpose—for he spoke to his own spirit alone, which would have comprehended no alien tongue; — he was, therefore, profoundly original. His quaintness arose from intuitive perception of that truth to which Lord Verulam alone has given distinct voice: — “There is no exquisite beauty which has not some strangeness in its proportion.” But whether obscure, original, or quaint, he was at all times sincere. He had no *affectations*.

(Rev. of *The Drama of Exile* 14)

This has been taken as a compliment on Shelley's manner, but the compliment is undercut by Poe's conception of poetry as art. In Poe's terms, Shelley produced the illusion of transcendence, and the concomitant illusion of absolute originality, without understanding the means by which this illusion was produced—in other words, he did not understand the principles of his art; in fact, Poe implies he did not even know poetry was an art. Poe, on the other hand, achieved a similar effect in a hoax. His cynical use of Romantic conventions was so convincing, that most readers doubted his sanity before they doubted his sincerity—again, unwittingly illustrating Poe's point. By using the

same lines from Bacon he had previously used in “Ligeia” in his review, he signals to the reader that the narrator of that tale, aside from being, like Coleridge, “buried in metaphysics,” also represents the “instinctive” transcendentalism he attributed to Shelley himself.<sup>69</sup> Thus, through a complicated jigsaw of cross-references, Poe traces the superstition depicted in his tales to the combined influence of two of the leading figures in English letters who, paradoxically, have almost unanimously been regarded as his masters.

Poe’s understanding of the “intuitive” poetry of poets like Shelley implies the idea that the sense of transcendence it conveys is an illusion. Thus, in effect, he treats Romantic poetry much like Maskelyne and Devant treat magic:

“magic” was once a term used to denote the cause of any event or achievement beyond the explanation of popular intelligence. (...) at the present day, the term ‘magic’ must have a meaning very different from that assigned to it in bygone centuries. The only meaning it can now possess must relate to the *apparent*, not actual defiance of natural laws.

Modern magic, therefore, deals exclusively with the creation of mental impressions. We cannot perform real miracles, as everybody is well aware. We can only perform feats which *look* like miracles, because the means whereby they are performed have been skilfully screened from observation.

(*Our Magic* 175-76)

Poe was convinced that the apparent miracle of Romantic poetry was performed by artificial means. To demonstrate his theory, he set out to produce similar effects in his own work, but always leaving hints that enabled the reader to apprehend the means whereby the illusion had been created. Romantic poets, however, were usually either unwilling or incapable of explaining the effects they

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69 The narrator uses the same sentence in reference to Ligeia’s “beauty:” “her features were not of that regular mould which we have been falsely taught to worship in the classical labors of the heathen. ‘There is no exquisite beauty,’ says Bacon, Lord Verulam, speaking truly of all the forms and *genera* of beauty, ‘without some *strangeness* in the proportion’” (Poe, “Ligeia” 311-12).



had wrought. Inasmuch as he treated poetry as a form of misdirection, the difference Poe establishes between himself and the true Romantic poet can be described in the terms of Maskelyne's distinction between illusionists, who only aim to deceive the senses, and charlatans, who

often refrain from committing themselves to any definite statement on the subject of their powers. In effect, they say to their spectators. "We leave you to decide upon the nature of our feats. If you can explain the methods we employ, you will know that what we do is not miraculous. If, on the other hand, you cannot explain our methods you will, of course, know that we have the power to work miracles. (...) Consequently, the mere reticence of the charlatan suffices to convince many people that "there is something in it." (Maskelyne and Devant 177)

Shelley, of course, though he did not attempt to explain his feats, was no charlatan. He is, Poe tells us, sincere. This means that he is himself convinced that "there is something in it," or in other words, that he was deceived by his own illusion—just like Poe's narrator was deceived by his phantasmagoria. This, however, is only the most superficial aspect of Poe's sly satire. The really important point, I think, is that, by treating poetry not as an art, but rather as a mystical discipline, Coleridge and Shelley had allowed the public to believe that it was a miracle. Poe evidently disagreed.

Incidentally, the reader's awe before the bewilderingly mysterious imaginative work of art, as described by Poe in the review of *Alciphron* I quoted some pages below, has an obvious and significant resemblance with the enthusiasm Ligeia's husband felt in the first period of their marriage, when he abandoned himself to her teachings:

With how vast a triumph — with how vivid a delight — with how much of all that is ethereal in hope — did I *feel*, as she bent over me in studies but little sought — but less known — that delicious vista by slow degrees expanding before me, down

whose long, gorgeous, and all untrodden path, I might at length pass onward to the goal of a wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden! (Poe, "Ligeia" 316).

This anticipation of a sublime knowledge that keeps eluding him sets the tone of the whole story. Here the narrator expresses the same faith in an ulterior meaning, imperfectly glimpsed through the surface of things which Poe himself had described in his criticism as the peculiar effect of the "mystic." In fact, the "vista" mentioned by Ligeia's husband clearly evokes those "long and wild vistas, dim bewildering visions of a far more ethereal beauty *beyond*" Poe mentioned in his review of *Alciphron*.

And then, through a mysterious sympathy, the reader of "Ligeia" gets the distinct feeling that there is some hidden meaning in the passage, just as there was supposed to be a hidden meaning to the mysterious texts Ligeia read with him, and which he could not decipher alone. There is, indeed, a definite "undercurrent" of meaning to the passage that responds to the narrator's appeal to look under the surface, but this is not the kind of "transcendental" content he makes us expect. In fact, his suggestions actually make it difficult to recognise the particular undercurrent to which I allude.

One assumes, of course, the narrator is speaking of the texts he studied under Ligeia, but another interpretation is possible. The narrator is speaking specifically of something he dimly distinguished only when "she bent over me." Is he really talking about "metaphysics?" After all, he admits he was particularly fascinated with Ligeia's "person;" this was the "one dear topic (...) on which my memory fails me not" (Poe, "Ligeia" 311). The long, allusive description that follows this statement makes it clear that by "person" he means body. It is only reasonable to assume that this topic was already getting his almost undivided attention during their "intercourse," which would explain why he profited so little from her lessons. He seems to have been more interested in the teacher than in her teachings. Indeed, the hints were clear from the start: the student's mind was not on his book; he only had eyes for Ligeia.

The narrator's interest in Ligeia's "person" is what renders the viable literal interpretation of his words relevant. It is very easy to picture the "vista" that was exposed to the narrator's view as his wife "bent" over him—the reference is, in itself, a little too specific for allegory—, and then the nature of his "feelings" at the time, and the reason why he found the sight so "delicious," also become obvious. It would appear that the pupil was sneaking a peak into the mistress's cleavage. The suggestion of latent unsatisfied sexual desire carries a note of resentment which affects other mysterious passages in the tale: "in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion. But in death only was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection" (Poe, "Ligeia" 317).

If works of imagination are defined by their "mystical" effect, that is, by the presence of hints of some ulterior meaning that is not immediately attainable, then "Ligeia" is most assuredly imaginative. But this "mystical" effect is conditional on the reader's agreement not to analyse his initial response. The tale will then communicate the same hope of "ethereal" knowledge beyond the grasp of the understanding that the "vista" offered by Ligeia as *she bent over him* gave her husband. However, whenever one attempts a literal-minded paraphrase of the narrator's sense, a joke results: the present example is a perfect illustration of this. In this case, the joke shows that the narrator had not sublimated his sexual desire, but merely glossed it over with his phony "transcendentalism." The true nature of the "feelings" Ligeia inspired in him, however, is still clearly recognisable under the varnish—on the surface. Thus, in all cases, the suggested meaning overthrows the apparent "thesis," dramatically denying the hope of transcendence. In other words, the path to that glorious Idea for which the narrator yearned is always blocked.

The presupposition that Poe himself was, in fact that he had to be, a "transcendentalist" is, therefore, a superstition. As regards the interpretation of "Ligeia," this conviction certainly functioned as such. It prevented first Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV and then Mabbott, for example, from recognising in Dickens's "A Madman's Manuscript," which both identified as a source of

“Ligeia,” the explanation of the “phantasmagoria” in Poe’s tale, even as they were enumerating Poe’s borrowings from it. The madman well remembers how happy he was after his wife died, “though it’s one of the last things,” he says,

I *can* remember: for now I mix up realities with my dreams, and having so much to do, and being always hurried here [incidentally, nineteenth-century mental health institutions are not reported to have provided much in the way of occupation to their inmates; either this was an uncommonly busy madhouse, or, as seems more likely, the narrator’s delirium was keeping him busy], have no time to separate the two, from some strange confusion in which they get involved” (Dickens, “Madman” 143).

The narrator of “Ligeia” evidently experiences a more severe form of the same condition. As he goes about committing his second femicide, and later, when he watches alone by the corpse of his victim, he is reminded of his first crime, and the two get hopelessly entangled in his mind—and also in the mind of the reader, who, influenced by his half-baked theories, prematurely despairs of literal interpretations and seeks instead some profound universal insight in the tale. Yet, unlike the narrator, the reader needs not hurry. By rereading the tale carefully, as we have seen, it is possible to separate dreams from realities.

Yet, I must insist, in a sense, Yvor Winters was absolutely right. Although Poe carefully ensured that it was possible to separate dreams from realities, and therefore that the wonders in Rowena’s room could be shown, beyond any reasonable doubt, to be phantasmagoric effects, he employed all artistic means to keep the reader from doing so—in other words, he took pains to conceal his art, and to make his carefully planned hoax look a spontaneous production of an ingenuous “poet,” his narrator.

As we have seen, Coleridge thought that the purpose of using the supernatural in literature was to keep the reader, as he puts it, “hovering between images” that were logically incompatible

with each other, without being able to settle on any definite idea. He thought that this unsettling state of epistemological hesitation in which the understanding was, as it were, paralysed, called into action the imagination, to which he recognised the power to somehow transcend empirical reality by reconciling contradictions, thus arriving at a distant glimmering of a total, strictly unintelligible Truth. Thus, he admitted his poetry was designed to give the reader a feeling similar to that which Ligeia inspired in her husband, who felt an ecstatic anticipation of the ultimate knowledge he felt was very close at hand, but could never grasp. This was precisely what Coleridge regarded as the end of poetry: intimate an ultimate, sublime knowledge, which tantalised us but could never truly be possessed. The only thing that poetry could aim to achieve, was to produce the conviction that this ultimate Truth existed.

Indeed, Coleridge treated the supernatural much as mystics treat symbols. Commenting Kant's philosophy in the *Biographia Literaria*, he remarks:

An IDEA, in the *highest* sense of the word, cannot be conveyed but by a symbol; and, except in geometry, all symbols of necessity involve an apparent contradiction. (...) Veracity does not consist in *saying*, but in the intention of communicating the truth; and the philosopher who can utter the whole truth without conveying falsehood (...) is constrained to express himself either *mythically* or equivocally. (1:156-57).

Such declarations express an impatience with relative truths that is arguably one of the distinctive features of Romanticism. It is also a classic statement of the idea that poetry should not convey definite meanings, but only the promise of a meaning. This, one suspects, is what Poe was alluding to when he spoke of Coleridge's "metaphysicianism."

As Coleridge saw it, the supernatural poem was characterised by the coexistence of two competing layers of meaning which were not susceptible of rational synthesis, but were nonetheless placed in semantic co-dependence. The only way to achieve such a synthesis was the imagination,

as indicated by Coleridge's use of his coinage "esemplastic" to qualify its operation (*Biographia* 1:168). Poe, as we have seen, often employs the same type of language, but never fails to completely subvert it.

Thus, for Coleridge, the two "images" in a supernatural poem cannot be reduced to sense, hence, the "mystery" of a supernatural plot must have no solution, in order that the reader may be compelled to assume an "imaginative" attitude, and thereby achieve a sense of the fundamental unity of opposites, and through it a glimpse of the fundamental wholeness of nature; of the fundamental but inapprehensible unity of the various aspects of nature. Poe's theory of the imagination, on the other hand, is a method to create the same peculiar feeling by misdirection. Whereas Coleridge speaks of the mystical "unity" of opposite ideas, in Poe's theory of fiction, "unity" has no longer any mystical value, and is presented merely as an effect of certain very definite formal characteristics of the literary work of art. More specifically, "unity" designates in Poe's criticism the effect of the technique that allows the writer of fiction to prevent the reader from analysing the two "currents of meaning," the upper and the submerged one, thus conveying the false impression that there is no rational solution to a mystery. This "unity" is thus put at the service of the chief design of the writer of the Gothic thriller, and of which Egæus provides an apt definition: "horror more horrible from being vague, and terror more terrible from ambiguity" (Poe, "Berenice" 217).

The most complete statement of Poe's theory of the short story can be found in his three reviews of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. In the second of these reviews, published in *Graham's Magazine* in May 1842, in particular, Poe expounds what may be termed a reader's response theory revolving around the notion of "unity of effect or impression," which Poe describes in very practical fashion (Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1842] 571). Only the "short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal" could produce that impression of unity which was a necessary condition for the display of "high genius": "Worldly interests intervening

during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. (...) During the hour of perusal,” the time it takes to read a short story through, on the other hand, “the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control,” provided, that is, that the reader does not get distracted (Poe, Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1842] 572).

Poe is effectively presenting literature as a form of psychological conditioning. By completely capturing and holding the reader’s attention, from start to finish, the writer obtains complete control over his or her reactions. But this unity, which enables the writer to keep the reader in that state of doubt that Coleridge regarded as the ultimate aim of supernatural poetry, does not depend, here, on any intrinsic quality of the material employed, but merely on the reader’s artificial confinement; on the writer’s ability, that is, to alienate the reader from reality. While some short stories may fail to interest the reader for even the short period it takes to read them, novels, and all longer compositions, are necessarily deprived of “the immense force derivable from *totality*,” for the very simple reason that “unity (...) cannot be thoroughly preserved in productions whose perusal cannot be completed at one sitting” (Poe, Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1842] 572, 571).

Here “unity” is no longer, as in Coleridge, a transcendent idea, but only an impression, which depends on the artist’s ability completely to monopolise the reader’s attention. As we have seen, Poe had an equally practical definition of imagination. A tale could only be termed “imaginative,” in Poe’s terms, when the reader got the feeling that there was more to it than the superficial, immediately accessible narrative content, that is, when the reader was given a sense of mystery. According to Poe, Irving’s sketches never failed to be only “fanciful:” they were all surface. In Hawthorne, on the other hand, “a strong undercurrent of *suggestion* runs continuously beneath the upper stream of the tranquil thesis,” which marks his work as “the product of a truly imaginative intellect” (Poe, Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1842] 571). But imagination represented a

challenge for writers, for there was the risk of the “undercurrent” interfering with what Poe regarded as the chief object of fiction, and indeed of all poetry: unity of effect.

In the second part of Poe’s review of *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe distinguishes two methods to bind together an “upper-” and an “undercurrent” of meaning: allegory and what he calls “deep suggestion.” He argues that the former, like an interruption in reading, effectively prevents unity, by creating a double effect, and inducing a sort of reflective mood in which the reader is always aware of two distinct and definite levels of meaning:

One thing is clear, that if allegory ever establishes a fact, it is by dint of overturning a fiction. Where the suggested meaning runs through the obvious one in a very profound undercurrent, so as never to interfere with the upper one without our own volition, so as never to show itself unless *called* to the surface, there only, for the proper uses of fictitious narrative is it available at all. Under the best circumstances, it [allegory] must always interfere with that unity of effect which, to the artist, is worth all the allegory in the world. Its vital injury, however, is rendered to the most vitally important point in fiction—that of earnestness or verisimilitude.

(Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1847] 582-83 emphasis mine)

The interests of allegory, therefore, are seen as competing with the interests of fiction. The purpose of the latter is to achieve an illusion of reality, and this is furthered by what Poe calls “unity of impression.” Poe’s idea of “verisimilitude” is in fundamental agreement with Coleridge’s theory of fiction. Both agree that the chief object of fiction is to create an illusion, and make the reader forget that it is an illusion. But, while Coleridge speaks of “willing suspension of disbelief,” Poe implies that the best poets do not ask, but forcefully constrain readers to suspend doubt, by confining them to a unified impression. Allegory inevitably diverts attention from that impression, and therefore, is detrimental to fiction. The reader knows, at every given point, what each element of the plot “means” in terms of the allegory, and this correspondence disrupts the dramatic illusion.



To put it simply, allegory does “vital injury” to verisimilitude because it reminds the reader that the story is fiction; that it is an art product, which is, according to Poe, precisely what the author should spare no effort to make the reader forget. Finally, Poe intimates the potential of the “undercurrent” to establish “facts” by displacing “fictions,” a conclusion the importance of which soon becomes apparent.

Poe argues that Hawthorne’s penchant for allegory has ruined most of his sketches. For Poe, as we have seen, the more artistic form of fiction is the “imaginative” mystery, in which the “undercurrent of meaning” was not immediately perceivable. Hawthorne was, Poe implies, enough of an artist to realise this, but he further argues that the “suggested meaning” of his mysteries was too close to the surface—this, of course, is the same error with which he had charged Dickens. That meaning, being too obvious, comes unbidden to the reader’s mind, diverting his attention from the vague impression of mystery it was the author’s design to convey. Indeed, if the solution is obvious, the tale will not convey the impression of mystery at all. At the same time, it will also fail to meet the minimal requirements for fiction, in the strict sense Poe attaches to the word, which depend on that all-important “unity of impression.”

Hawthorne, then, has sacrificed fiction to the “undercurrent of meaning,” that is, to imagination. The imaginative writer must only intimate the presence of a secondary meaning, guaranteeing that this meaning will not present itself spontaneously to the reader’s mind, as this would bring about the collapse of the fiction—as Poe puts it, it would “overturn” the fiction. This, he thought, had to be avoided at all costs. The ready availability of the “undercurrent,” then, implies a further distinction within the group of “imaginative” fiction: the allegorical tale where the deeper meaning is immediately accessible; and what may be termed the “mystery,” where that deeper meaning must be dug out.

Statements such as the one I have just transcribed appear to corroborate Winters’s contention that for Poe a writer had only to “write with an air of meaning concealed,” regardless of being

aware of any such meaning (“Edgar Allan Poe” 245). However, Poe goes on to clarify that this was not the idea. Hawthorne, though he left the “undercurrent” too close to the surface in most of his tales, was guilty of the opposite mistake in others. In these tales Hawthorne, had buried his secret *too deep*. For, as becomes apparent in the next pages of the review, Poe thought that Hawthorne had intended his mystery to be solved—only not on a first reading.

Poe’s review is itself a fine example of misdirection, as it illustrates the kind of “suggestiveness” it describes. The “undercurrent” must be buried somewhat deeper than allegory, so as not to “interfere” with the ostensible “thesis” unless the narrator makes a deliberate effort to *call* it to the surface. That is the only “proper use” of an “undercurrent” of meaning in fiction. Thus, he maintains, “The Minister’s Black Veil” is much to be preferred to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the classical example of the use of allegory in English fiction, which gets dismissed as a “ludicrously over-rated book:” “the pleasure derivable from it, in any sense, will be found in the direct ratio of the reader’s capacity to smother its true purpose, in the direct ratio of his ability to keep the allegory out of sight, or of his *inability* to comprehend it” (*Rev. of Twice-Told Tales* [1847] 583).

The reader will get no pleasure from an “imaginative” work of literary art unless he or she does not understand the suggested, or submerged meaning: for one cannot really pretend to know what one *does* know. Unlike Coleridge, however, Poe does in no way imply that the mystery should be insoluble, only that it would be preferable to keep the reader from “comprehending” it. Indeed, Poe clearly states that the most artistic use of an “undercurrent of meaning” is to ensure the reader cannot grasp it unless an effort is made *to understand*. And then, of course, Poe’s fiction demonstrates conclusively that, by enshrouding the incidents in a tale in a phantasmagoric atmosphere, the reader could be kept from grasping the solution to the most obvious “mysteries.”

In other words, the author’s awareness of any definite meaning is not irrelevant for the purposes of fiction. “Truth,” he writes, “is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale. Some of the finest tales are tales of ratiocination” (*Rev. of Twice-Told Tales* [1842] 573). Poe tells us that

some of Hawthorne's tales—which incidentally are the reviewer's favourites—belong precisely to that category, or rather, Poe implies, they *should have belonged*, if their author had had a correct understanding of his art. The surprising application of the term “tale of ratiocination” to some of Hawthorne's sketches contradicts the common assumption that it was Poe's term for the detective story—Hawthorne, of course, did not write detective fiction. Poe presents “The Minister's Black Veil” as an illustration of the concept. It is, he writes,

a masterly composition of which the sole defect is that to the rabble its exquisite skill will be *caviare*. The *obvious* meaning of this article will be found to smother its insinuated one. The *moral* put into the mouth of the dying minister will be supposed to convey the *true* import of the narrative; and that a crime of dark dye, (having reference to the ‘young lady’) has been committed, is a point which only minds congenial with that of the author will perceive. (Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1842] 575)

Another tale in the collection, “The White Old Maid,” Poe regards as “objectionable, even more than the ‘Minister's Black Veil,’ on the score of its mysticism. Even with the thoughtful and analytic, there will be much trouble in penetrating its entire import” (Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1842] 575). That is, these tales illustrate what a tale of ratiocination *is not*, in the sense that the solution cannot be arrived at by ratiocination alone—yet, Poe assures us that the author had meant the reader to guess this solution. Whether he was right about Hawthorne's intentions is immaterial to our purposes. The passage embodies Poe's own peculiar understanding of how mysteries should be handled in fiction. Again, the term “mysticism” is used to denote not a transcendent intuition, but the writer's ability to obscure a definite, intelligible meaning which, according to Poe, the writer designed to convey, as is indicated by his providing a solution to “The Minister's Black Veil.”

Poe thereby places these two tales by Hawthorne in the same category in which he had included *Barnaby Rudge*: the “mystery,” for which he had meanwhile created the new designation of “tale of ratiocination.” According to Poe, then, the reader of a “mystery” is supposed to replace

the false impression with the true story. What is remarkable about the Hawthorne review is that Poe applies the term “tale of ratiocination” to tales where the truth is not delivered to the reader by the end of the tale. More importantly, Poe clearly presents “The Minister’s Black Veil” as a crime mystery. Theoretically, then, Hawthorne’s is precisely the kind of tale he had mentioned in his previous reviews of Dickens’ novel, but of which he had supplied no example, in which it was legitimate to employ “dark hints of some uncertain evil” (Rev. of *Barnaby Rudge* [1841] 219). As we have seen, he said these “hints” were only artistically employed where the *dénouement*, or recognition, was omitted, to be recovered by the reader—as Poe did with Dickens’s unfinished novel.

Following these hints, as the reader will recall, Poe anticipated the solution to the mystery long before Dickens revealed it. This, Poe said, was not supposed to happen. The ulterior meaning, the true story, overturned the fiction, that is, the obvious but false impression, and thus the effect intended by the author, mystery, was destroyed—at least, it would be destroyed to a reader who paid attention to the details. The reader was not supposed to recognise the “truth” until the writer was ready to reveal it. In any event, whenever the revelation was made in the course of the reading, the reader would be disillusioned by it, and would have no interest in rereading the story. And that is precisely why, said Poe, the solution should not be intimated by means of mysterious clues unless the reader was supposed to play the detective.<sup>70</sup>

In any case, by an effective and adroit use of such clues, Dickens had made it possible for the “thoughtful and analytical” Poe to discover the solution to the mystery. Poe implies that he erred only in making his clues a little too obvious. Hawthorne, on the other hand, had apparently made what Poe regarded as a legitimate use of “dark hints,” for he designed—at least Poe thought this was his design—to let the reader surmise the solution to his mystery. However, while Dickens

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<sup>70</sup> It is interesting to note the complementary conclusion that flows from this reasoning: that, in tales where the solution of the mystery is to be revealed to the reader—such as detective stories—the reader should not be allowed to anticipate the solution by ratiocination, which is indeed the case with Poe’s Dupin stories, where the reader is always kept in ignorance of some crucial detail that effectively prevents him or her from anticipating the solution.

risked premature revelation, the solution to Hawthorne's mysteries ran the risk of remaining buried for all eternity. The "truth" he wished to convey, Poe implied, was beyond the reach of "ratiocination," and therefore even the most "thoughtful and analytic" of readers might not perceive it. Poe also implies, of course, that "ratiocination" should be enough to decipher the mystery. The solution to Hawthorne's mysteries, however, depended rather on "congeniality," that is, on the reader's sympathy with the author, or, in other words, on his previous knowledge of his methods and opinions. The implication is that the meaning of the tale was not inherent to its plot, but depended on previous knowledge of the author, necessarily derived from external sources. Thus, when he accuses Hawthorne of "mysticism," he means by that word more or less the same thing Yvor Winters meant by "obscurantism." In other words, Poe makes it very clear that mysteries, as he conceived them, were not exempted from the general rule he formulated in 1845 in his review of Elizabeth Oakes Smith's *Poetical Writings*: "Every work of art should contain within itself all that is required for its own comprehension" (912). Thus, in the final analysis, Poe tells us that Hawthorne's mysteries were not, but should have been "tales of ratiocination."

In his article, revealingly titled "A Crisis in the History of American Obscurantism," Winters compares the styles of Hawthorne and Henry James with Poe's. According to him, whereas the former had been accidentally obscurantist, because they had had what Winters regarded as an imperfect understanding of their art, Poe had been an obscurantist by design, and adhered to the practice quite systematically, which this critic found unacceptable:

Poe is, in brief, an explicit obscurantist. Hawthorne, in his four last and unfinished romances gives us the physical embodiment of allegory without the meaning to be embodied, but he appears to hope for a meaning, to be, somehow, pathetically and unsuccessfully in search of one. (...) But in Poe, obscurantism has ceased to be merely an accident of inadequate understanding, it has become the explicit aim of

writing and has become the generation of a method. Poe's aesthetic is an aesthetic of obscurantism. ("Edgar Allan Poe" 246)

Thus, Winters effectively identifies Hawthorne with his ideal of "mystical" Romanticism. He thought that "inadequate understanding" was a legitimate excuse for obscurantism, but here paradoxically suggests that Poe understood what he was doing, and that this disqualified him to be mystic. Again, I think he is absolutely right.

In effect, Poe quite ostensibly accuses Hawthorne of "transcendentalism," which for him consisted precisely in "hoping" for a meaning when one was aware of none, which was precisely what Winters thought distinguished the legitimate Romanticism of Hawthorne from Poe's false Romanticism. This becomes very clear by the end of his last review of *Twice-Told Tales*. Hawthorne has the purest style, the finest taste, the most available scholarship, the most delicate humor, the most touching pathos, the most radiant imagination, the most consummate ingenuity; and with these he has done *well* as a mystic. But is there any one of these qualities which should prevent his doing doubly as well in a career of honest, upright, sensible, prehensible and comprehensible things? Let him mend his pen, get a bottle of visible ink, come out of the Old Manse, cut Mr. Alcott, hang (if possible) the editor of 'The Dial,' and throw out of the window to the pigs all his odd numbers of 'The North American Review.' (Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1847] 587-88)

But then, Poe appears to be condemning Hawthorne for doing the same thing he himself had done in "Ligeia," "Berenice," and "Morella," all of which appear to be every bit as "mystical" as Hawthorne's mysterious tales. But the resemblance between those tales and "The Minister's Black Veil," in particular, is the smoking gun. The "obvious" meaning, or "upper thesis," of that tale corresponds to the "moral" put in the mouth of his protagonist. But Poe argues that this obvious thesis was not the "true import" of the tale, which was really about a secret crime, committed against a "young lady," which must be brought to the surface by the reader. In other words, the

“moral” the protagonist attaches, or imposes on his story, enforces a cover story, a fiction within the fiction, which the suggested meaning must overturn.

Poe, then, draws attention to a tale that is remarkably similar to some of his tales, and compares it unfavourably with a solve-it-yourself mystery, thereby indirectly implying that his tales belonged to that elusive category. Very few people noticed how original this idea was. Poe does not supply a single example of the sort of fiction that, he writes, Hawthorne should have written, had he not been so dreadfully “transcendentalist.” But he does imply he could have written a mystery much better than either Dickens or Hawthorne. Evidently, he did unto Dickens and Hawthorne what he would have liked his reader to do unto him. The absence of a *dénouement* and the dark hints that disturbed, in tales like “Ligeia,” the superficial “thesis” with seemingly impertinent “suggestions” were there to prompt the reader to go back to the tale, displace the narrator’s fiction with the true story, and review the critical verdict.

Poe complained that Hawthorne’s secret was beyond the reach of analysis, and his practice was consistent with the theory that underlies this statement. Nothing but analysis could displace the first impression a tale like “Ligeia” makes on the reader—and that is the beauty of this boldest of hoaxes. Poe spares no effort to keep his reader on the edge of his or her seat; in fact, on that first sitting, the reader is, as Poe told us, completely under his control, and susceptible to all impressions he may wish to convey. It is very unlikely that a reader thus circumstanced will be capable of analysis, or indeed, any structured thought. Besides, why should the reader even bother to make an effort to understand when the narrator tells us not to try, and the very spirit of the age is hostile to analysis. Therefore, there is an obvious and immediate egotistical reward for assuming an uncritical stance. The rewards of discovery, on the other hand, are too remote and uncertain to be alluring.

Poe did warn us, but his warnings are like that shadow on the floor, we just could not see at first. Reviewing Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* in 1836, Poe singles out “A Madman’s Manuscript,” actually appending good part of the tale to his uncommonly short review, with the following

commentary. "The writer is supposed (...), by a strong effort of the will, to have preserved his secret from the eye of even his most intimate friends" ("Pickwick Club" 319).<sup>71</sup> I omitted the middle of the sentence: the "writer," of course, is the "madman," not Dickens, and his madness is the "secret." Again, Poe chooses to draw attention to a tale about a crafty dissembler who had managed to keep his crime, the murder of his wife, from being detected. Of course, in one sense, I believe he does intend obliquely to point out the similarity between his narrator in "Ligeia" and Dickens's "madman." At the same time, however, by referring to the first-person narrator as "the writer," Poe highlights the fact that the real author simulated the madness of his narrator. This, he said, was the best in the whole book. Poe always paid more attention to the tales that most resembled his own, but kept insisting that these tales were not quite all that they could have been, by holding them to criteria which, he admits, were entirely of his own devising. And he felt particularly attracted to tales of hidden murder and femicide, in which, he insisted, the mystery was either too obvious or altogether impenetrable. Thus, of course, he indirectly prompts us to seek the undeveloped solution to the mysteries of "Berenice," "Morella," and "Ligeia." After all, it is only reasonable to suppose Poe attempted to do what he advised others to do. Upon inquiry, we find this was exactly what he had been doing.

Thus, Poe's theory of fiction is indeed an "aesthetic of obscurantism," as Winters wrote. But, inasmuch as the writer is explicitly required to draw the reader's attention from some definite "truth," it is also a poetics of misdirection, that is, a poetics of the hoax. The trick, as he repeatedly stated, consisted in confining the reader to a unified impression. That is, by conferring the appearance of irreducible unity to what is in fact an unstable, inconsistent mixture of fact and delusion, the writer kept the reader from understanding there was something to be understood. In the abstract, one might say that the false impression to be conveyed is unity itself. For Poe clearly

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<sup>71</sup> Poe's very short notice appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in November 1836.



implies that this artificial effect is the basis of the Romantic mode of “transcendent” expression, which he inexorably leads us to conclude is itself an artifice.

Thus, at a time when the leading figures in Romanticism were saying that the poet was under no strict obligation to make sense, and in fact valuing those tales and poems who could not be reduced to plain sense, Poe was saying the opposite: that there had to be some meaning, but the poet should be able to obscure it so that it would not interfere with the “mystical” effect. In other words, the poet had to make it appear there was no meaning. The best way to do this, as implied by the examples he chose to illustrate his point, like “The Minister’s Black Veil” or *Barnaby Rudge*, is to speak through the mouth of characters who really and honestly believe the events in the tale make no sense. Meanwhile, both in his theory and in the practice that illustrates it, Poe intimates that by turning off the understanding, as it were, poets and readers did not get any valuable “transcendental” insights, they could only get deluded. Thus, Poe’s *meaning* constitutes a radical departure from the typical Romantic attitude of his narrator. This is, I think, the key aspect of Poe’s method that most criticism has failed to acknowledge. In this sense, then, I regard Poe as an aesthetical iconoclast who sought to displace the Romantic myth of the creative “genius” from within.

In fact, his subversion of Romantic tropes affects the understanding of the creative process itself. Just as the vision of the narrator is a monstrous, incoherent hodge-podge of fact and fiction, of scraps of memories, phantasmagoric effects, and shadows that resolves into an intelligible chain of natural causes and effects which belies his pretensions to mystical insight, so the tale itself, is a patchwork of “reminiscences” from an ever-expanding list of sensationalist narratives, mostly but not exclusively fictional, that Poe had skilfully woven together into what appears a spontaneous, inartificial unified creation. Once the Romantic cover is blown, however, the true face of the author—of the implied author, if you will—is revealed, by contrast with the narrator’s. The same quaint turns of phrase and weird unaccountable details that ultimately reveal the narrator’s dirty secret,

also reveal the sources of Poe's "inspiration," and with it the true history of the composition of "Ligeia."

The Romantic myth of spontaneity is then displaced by the painstaking work of combination that went into the composition of "Ligeia." Each of the constituent elements of that myth, specifically, are exposed as fictions, or effects: originality, inspiration, even an authority based on the display of esoteric ancient lore—which was habitually used in both the Gothic and the Romantic approaches to story-telling as a throwback at pre-scientific thinking; in Poe, it becomes a means of misdirection, a fact which I think speaks for itself. Poe, as I said before, wanted to ensure that the analytical reader could discover not only how unoriginal he was, but also to bring about the recognition that the reader's perception of authority and originality is itself based on deceptive appearances. The moral of the tale—as opposed to the moral of the apparent story—is that one should never take fiction too seriously. For fiction is only make-belief or, in other words, a deception—this is what Poe keeps reminding his readers of. Thus, the identification of the narrator with the Romantic genius, and, by implication, with the author, depends itself on that arbitrary "unity of effect" that was, Poe thought, the soul of the illusion.

Through the narrator's downfall, fiction and poetry are reduced to natural proportions along with his supposedly transcendent intuitions, and the apparent contradiction between Poe's theory and his practice resolves into a joke. Indeed, Stovall was driven to the conclusion that Poe could not possibly mean to deny the Romantic distinction between Fancy and Imagination—even though he did—by the impression that Poe's practice, as a poet and a writer of prose fiction, implied that very distinction and, in fact, something like Coleridge's theory of poetry. In other words, he assumed Poe was what he seemed, or more precisely the characters he chose to assume in his fiction. The discovery of the true substance of the shadow entails the revelation of his method of manipulating Romantic expectations for the purpose of discrediting them as a particular instance of the "transcendentalism" and "metaphysicianism" he constantly ridiculed. "Ligeia" is a hoax

perpetrated through a clever parody of ideas Poe found lying around in the writings of his contemporaries, and which, having become almost second nature to his public, were the least likely to be questioned. The common denominator of these ideas was the blurring of the distinction between the formal cohesiveness of a work of art and a mystical idea of cosmic totality, which had been articulated with particular vigor by Coleridge.

Although the solution to “Ligeia” is implied in the plot, it is reinforced by Poe’s buried allusions to the true sources of his inspiration, which are never mentioned by name in the tale. Indeed, the comparison between source and model that, through those very allusions, Poe invites us to make, illumines and reiterates the apparently impertinent suggestions that arise from his text, and which run contrary to its obvious import, or “thesis.” Usually that comparison has a double effect, of highlighting the unreliability, indeed the absurdity, of the narrator’s conclusions, and intimating the probable explanation of some of the many mysterious circumstances in Poe’s tale. Sometimes those narratives contain a version of the same supernatural or improbable phenomenon the narrator thinks took place in his case, but, on closer inspection, we find that, while in the original the absence of an alternative explanation forced us to accept the reality of that phenomenon, in Poe’s imitation, everything forces us to reject it. In other cases, extraordinary events similar to those reported by Poe’s narrator are given a natural explanation that fits the evidence in “Ligeia” much better than the narrator’s supernatural hypothesis. Thus, Poe surreptitiously reinstates the distinction between superstition and reason which had been studiously blurred by Romanticism by a combination of internal evidence and intertextual echoes. Concomitantly, the identification of Poe’s sources contributes to dispel the misleading unity of effect that played a decisive role in creating the illusion of the supernatural.

And this is why I say that traditional source studies are inadequate to the study of Poe’s fiction, and even of his criticism. “Rarely,” Pollin remarks, “does Poe bluntly state the sources of the many borrowings and adaptations of ‘hints’ in *The Brevities*, and yet he manages to lead the

alert and knowing reader to almost every author; the relationship often becomes one of a clever miscreant or impish trickster versus a hard-working detective or spy” (“Sources and Borrowings” xxxiii-iv). Indeed, Pollin demonstrated conclusively that the small articles that make up the *Pinakidia* and *Marginalia* series (published respectively in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1836, and in several magazines between November 1844 and September 1849), as well as the shorter “Chapter of Suggestions” and “Fifty Suggestions” (published respectively in the annual *The Opal* for 1845 and in the May-June 1849 issue of *Graham’s Magazine*) were literary puzzles. These were very short, sometimes even telegraphic commentaries in which the author displays what appears to be an enviable domain over very obscure ancient or modern lore.

This sort of brevity was very popular at the time. Such articles, which in those days were used as fillers by many magazines, were modelled on Isaac D’Israeli’s *Curiosities of Literature* (1791-1823) and other similar works. They projected an image of literary competence, of “learning,” which was highly marketable. These short notes, Poe slyly remarked in the “Introduction” to the *Pinakidia*, were

the result, in some cases, of much thought and more research, expended, however, at a manifest disadvantage, if we regard merely the estimate which the public are willing to set upon such articles. It sometimes occurs that in papers of this nature may be found a collective mass of general, but more usually of classical erudition, which, if dexterously besprinkled over a proper surface of narrative, would be sufficient to make the fortunes of one or two hundred ordinary novelists in these our good days, when all heroes and heroines are necessarily men and women of ‘extensive acquirements.’ But, for the most part, these ‘*Brevities*,’ &c. are either piecemeal cullings at second hand, from a variety of sources hidden, or supposed to be hidden, or more audacious pilferings from those vast storehouses of brief facts,

memoranda, and opinions in general literature, which are so abundant in all the principal libraries of Germany and France. (*Brevities* 1)

Let the reader beware. Displays of erudition in this vein are not always what they seem. There are many upstart writers who do not scruple to take advantage of the research of others. Some of the more well-known repositories of recondite lore, such as Isaac D’Israeli’s *Curiosities of Literature* itself, “have, of late years, proved exceedingly convenient to some little American pilferers in that line, but are now becoming too generally known to allow much hope of their good things being any longer appropriated with impunity” (Poe, *Brevities* 2). Yet, Pollin found out that Poe was precisely one such “pilferer”—and what is more, he found out that he had plundered precisely the *Curiosities* for the *Pinakidia*, and that his pilferings had gone, despite his preface, practically unnoticed:

The tone of Poe’s Introduction [to *Pinakidia*] matches well that of the first installment of the *Marginalia*, in its irony, banter, and factitious erudition. It must have been intended to pique the curiosity of the ‘classical and general reader’ [this comes from Poe’s Introduction] of the *Southern Literary Messenger* and set him to the schoolboy game of searching for the sources of unidentified ‘cullings.’ That Poe himself is one of the ‘audacious pilferers’ whom he mocks in paragraph I is part of the joke. (Introduction xii)

The joke rewards the “schoolboy” for following the “‘clues’ playfully scattered by Poe” and which, according to Pollin, “would enable him to disclaim concealment if arraigned by critics” (Introduction xii). But there is more to it than that, I think. Poe’s strategy draws attention to the grounds on which the reader will decide whether an author is “learned.” In fact, once we realise what Poe is really doing, we recognise that his introduction is actually an ironical advertising of his own pilferings, as well as a satire on the idea of learning itself.

This is perfectly in keeping with Poe's conceptualisation of imitation and plagiarism which, incidentally, is fully developed in one of the small articles that comprise the *Marginalia*, numbered 160 in Pollin's edition: "Imitators," Poe writes,

are not, necessarily, unoriginal—except at the exact points of the imitation. Mr. Longfellow, decidedly the most audacious imitator in America, is markedly original, or, in other words, imaginative upon the whole; and many persons have, from the latter branch of the fact, been at a loss to comprehend, and therefore, to believe, the former. Keen sensibility of appreciation—that is to say, the poetic *sentiment* (in distinction from the poetic *power*) leads almost inevitably to imitation. Thus all the great poets have been gross imitators. It is, however, a mere *non distributio medii* hence to infer, that all great imitators are poets. Still, what I mean to say is, that Mr. Aldrich's *penchant* for imitation does not show him to be incapable of poetry—as some have asserted. (*Brevities* 269)

Poe argues, from similarities between some verses by this little-known American poet and a poem by Thomas Hood that the former "imitated" the latter. This was, Poe says, "plagiarism" in the first degree. But Poe's views on the subject are at odds with the notion of plagiarism current in his time. Indeed, it was then generally thought that the writer's unawareness that he was imitating excused the imitation, which was thus distinguished from plagiarism, which was in turn commonly conceived as a voluntary imitation—this, it was thought, constituted an innexcusable literary crime. Poe, on the other hand, identified another "imitation" by Aldrich, arguing that it was not "plagiarism" because, contrary to his first example, "there seems scarcely any design of concealing the source;" indeed, Poe quotes Aldrich's poem "as evidence" of his "aptitude at imitation" (*Brevities* 269).

Not only does Poe construe "imitation" as a legitimate device, he assures that all the best poets do it. For no poet creates, in the proper sense of the word. Truly imaginative poets achieve

novel combinations which appear uncontrived and spontaneous, but are, nonetheless, necessarily “re-soluble into the old.” Moreover, he adds that legitimate imitation consists in borrowing deliberately from a relatively obscure source without attempting to conceal the borrowing. In effect, Poe tells us that, in an epoch in which the concept of plagiarism was broad enough to encompass virtually all imitation, the writer had to misdirect the public—that is, to make his writing appear *absolutely* original. Again, we cannot honestly say Poe did not try to tip us off to what he really was doing. But one can understand why so few critics heeded the warning. None of the common critical terms in this passage is employed in its current Romantic acceptance. “Imitation,” “imagination,” “originality,” and “poetry:” all these terms depend on Poe’s theory—not Coleridge’s.

Pollin perceived that Poe’s puzzles brought out the limitations of an approach based on an unsophisticated and uniform understanding of the relationship between the source and the imitation, which places the emphasis entirely on the former, downplaying the active role of the imitator, and disregarding the peculiar ends to which the source material is adapted. In other words, the novelty in Pollin’s approach was that of regarding Poe’s borrowings as objects, rather than means of interpretation.

Thus, he distinguished two types of allusion in Poe’s brevities. On the one hand, there were ostensible allusions to the texts on the margins of which the writer was supposed to have hastily jotted down his impressions. Pollin found out that these were generally red-herrings—that is, that the bibliography named in the text was seldom the real source of Poe’s witticism. Most of the erudition Poe displayed came from “unnamed intermediary sources,” or “buried sources,” to which the scholarly reader was directed by another kind of allusions, which were covert rather than overt (Introduction xii-xiii). Through them, scholars have been able to trace most of Poe’s lore to some of the most popular collections of literary “curiosities,” or, in one notable case, a book so obscure and elusive that many doubted its existence prior to 1929, when it was finally located by Mabbott.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Poe directly quotes “the anonymous and very rare *Antediluvians Antiquities. Fragments of the Age of Methuselah. Translated by an American Traveler in the East* (1829) in *Pinakidia* 2, which in his note to the text Pollin conjectures was “perhaps the germ of Poe’s material-spiritual view of the universe as developed into *Eureka*”

Above all, Pollin's approach is informed by the sense that Poe's brevities are not what they seem, that is, pedantic, sometimes seemingly arbitrary displays of recondite learning, but riddles, the solution of which entailed the displacement of the rhetoric underlying such displays. The true meaning of those notes, therefore, was not the relationship they established with the ostensible pseudo-source; on the contrary, the meaning of those little notes was, precisely, the relationship they established with their unnamed "secondary" source, which was in fact the principal source. Therefore, according to Pollin, it was not enough to detect the true source; the scholar should describe the nature of the meaningful relationship Poe's text established with that source. Accordingly, his list of sources for the brevities:

interprets 'sources' as does Poe, who doted on the topic in his reviews and who would justify presenting this set of 'leads' as helping to analyze the link between the literary stimuli or ideas and his brief essays in the *Brevities*. Most of the sources are close and pertain to the main subject, with Poe's wording being an echo or a virtual duplicate. For some, however, the connection is more inferential, and several use the source for only a portion of the article. Outright quotation of a passage on which Poe writes comments as the gist of the article does not constitute a 'source' for this enumeration. It is chiefly when the wording and the viewpoint of the original author is taken over by Poe, usually without his indicating the specific work or the extension of the adaptation that it is included here. ("Sources and Borrowings" xxxiv)

In other words, "outright quotations" cannot be trusted—they often prove to be dead ends. Undeclared quotations from "buried sources" alone are significant for the solution of the riddle. These come in two different varieties, the "virtual duplicate," and another, special kind of quotation, which appears in "adapted" form, and whose connection with Poe's text is not immediately apparent but must be "inferred." In those cases, instead of borrowing the words, Poe assumes the general

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(1849) (Poe, *Brevities* 11n).



“viewpoint” of the original. Pollin applied the same procedure to Poe’s fiction, unearthing borrowings from Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* in several tales and in both of Poe’s longer narratives, for example, or identifying significant secondary sources for the motto of “Eleanora” (see chs. 2 and 3 in *Discoveries in Poe*). Unfortunately, these studies had very little impact on the scholarship of Poe’s fiction and poetry. In fact, it appears to me that even Pollin failed to realise the importance of his finding.

In his introduction to the *Pinakidia*, Poe warned readers precisely against the kind of pilfering he was about to perform—there too, as usual, he was hiding the crime in plain sight, where it was least likely to be sought. However, he also slyly implied that such pilferings would be much more advantageous to the writer’s reputation if “dexterously besprinkled over a proper surface of narrative,” to adorn the speech of a “hero or heroine” of “extensive acquirements,” such as were then in demand (*Brevities* 1). This, of course, is precisely what Poe was doing in his fiction, most notably in “Ligeia.” In the introduction, Poe further acknowledges that the function of such displays of learning was merely that of making an impression, that would be enough to intimidate most readers into submission. After all, the reader would probably surmise the writer possessed technical and literary expertise that enabled him to tackle texts that were inaccessible to the unlearned majority.

The strategy that combined ostensibly learned allusions and covert quotations, and which enabled Poe to conceal his true sources, his meaning, and his satire, from the “general public,” without pushing it beyond the reach of analysis, is certainly present in “Ligeia,” but has remained mostly unnoticed. Mabbott, for example, clearly felt that Poe’s borrowings had no meaning in themselves. Thus, when he found that one passage in the tale was lifted whole from Dickens’s “Madman’s Manuscript,” while the learned allusion to “the daughters of Delos” had been lifted almost verbatim from Bulwer-Lytton’s “Manuscript Found in a Madhouse,” he did not think these were facts requiring interpretation (Mabbott, *Tales* 1:331n3). Yet, these borrowings, which may be

filed under Pollin's "virtual duplicate" heading, are, as I have attempted to show, highly significant. And then, there are the many "inferential connections" which I have been tracing, and will continue to do so in the next chapters, in which Poe assumes the "point of view" of a character, real or imaginary, which inspired some trait of his narrator, but uses, except for the borrowing of some tell-tale unusual phrase, different words. These sources, however, are never named.

The narrator's flashy allusions, on the other hand, while they lead us away from the true sources of Poe's inspiration, being themselves often borrowed, sometimes function as clues to some buried intermediary source, which is itself a hint to Poe's true purposes. The problem is further complicated by the fact that the narrator's ostensible allusions, despite being usually wrong, still indirectly lead to some real source of Poe's tale. A perfect example of this is the motto the narrator erroneously attributes to Glanvill, in a way that implies his acquaintance with some of the texts the seventeenth-century divine *did* write, and which establish very meaningful and illuminating connections with some of the most bizarre aspects of the apparent "thesis."

Indeed, upon inspection, one finds that the abstruse allusions of the narrator are always botched; that they are all show, and invariably belie the narrator's pretensions to literary competence—in this chapter I will provide several examples of this. Yet, since the "learning" to which they allude is always very obscure, they effectively obscure the solution to the mystery. Thus, I think "Ligeia" may be described as a double mystery: a murder mystery, and a bibliographical riddle the solution of which requires the kind of approach Pollin introduced. In fact, like "Ligeia," the articles included in *Pinakidia* and *Marginalia* have a false "thesis," which is suggested by the ostensible allusions, and a true meaning, which depends on the buried allusions.

I have attempted to demonstrate that the narrator's "thesis" is a false, or cover story, based on erroneous premises and logically unsound inferences. Although there is no way of paraphrasing the apparent narrative with any degree of preciseness, such is its inconsistency, most readers will probably agree that the following is more or less what appears to have happened: the narrator's first

wife came back from the grave to poison her successor because she could not bear to see him in another's arms, and briefly took her place. This, the resulting impression of the narrator's suggestions, is evidently the collage of at least two fictional sources: one supernatural tale about a revenant vampire wife who comes back from the grave, banishing her successor to resume in death the position she had occupied in life, "Wake Not the Dead;" and a weird, albeit perfectly natural anonymous story entitled "The Somnambulist," published in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* in February 1838, about a gentleman whose wife is poisoned by his plebeian quondam sweetheart. The resurrection of Ligeia-Rowena itself seems to have been inspired by an obscure biography of the Rev. William Tennent, Jr. (1705-1777), pastor of Freehold, New Jersey. Some elements of Poe's story, namely the tell-tale phrase "shadow of a shade," appear to have come from Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*. Other sources I have been able to identify include such disparate works as Glanvill's *Essays*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). These sources are added to the others hitherto mentioned, some of which, for example *The Monk*, will be revisited in this chapter.

As I have before said, Poe alludes to all this sources in a way that shows, I think, that he was not trying to conceal his borrowings any more than he had tried to conceal the sources of *Pinakidia*—he merely obscures the hints that make their identification possible by the same technique that he used to makes us miss the true story in "Ligeia:" misdirection, or literary sleight of hand. In "Ligeia," this is mostly done by borrowing not from one, but from many different sources. The pieces of the elaborated jigsaw thus created do not quite fit together, which I believe is entirely deliberate on Poe's part. Indeed, the inconsistencies in the narrator's "thesis" often mark the intersection of the radically incompatible stories Poe stitched together, and thus serve the double purpose of revealing the crime and Poe's artistry. In other words, the solutions to the both the mystery of the story itself and of its composition are revealed by decomposing the "unified impression" one derived from that first sitting, and subjecting the tale to several rereadings.

In the article on N. P. Willis I quote above, Poe writes:

The pure imagination chooses, *from either beauty or deformity*, only the most combinable things hitherto uncombined;—the compound, as a general rule, partaking (in character) of sublimity or beauty, in the ratio of the respective sublimity or beauty of the things combined—which are themselves still to be considered as atomic—that is to say, as previous combinations. But, as often analogously happens in physical chemistry, so not unfrequently does it occur in this chemistry of the intellect, that the admixture of two elements will result in a something that shall have nothing of the quality of one of them—or even nothing of the qualities of either.

(“American Prose Writers” 17)

By employing the same kind of Romantic jargon he put in the mouth of the narrator of “Ligeia,” Poe insensibly leads a reader whose tastes have been determined by Romanticism to conclude that his text presupposes the basic Romantic assumptions that are associated with that jargon, namely that the “sources” of poetry are unfathomable. Poe is, of course, ostensibly confuting those very notions, but this will not necessarily pose a problem for such a reader. Stovall, as we have seen, completely dismissed Poe’s meaning. Accordingly, he sees Poe’s chemical analogy as an illustration of *Coleridge’s* theory—the very theory that Poe explicitly rejected:

if one asks how small these combinable parts may be, the reply is obviously that they may be as small in their world, the ideal, as the atom in the physical world. He actually mentions physical chemistry as an aid to the understanding of imaginative creation, which he calls ‘the chemistry of the intellect.’ In the light of this analogy his example of the griffin as an object created imaginatively is absurd. As a matter of fact, I feel confident that he agreed with Coleridge in every respect; but, impelled by the desire to be original, and painfully conscious of his obligation to Coleridge, he sought to avoid that obligation by opposing him. (...) he began to quibble over the

words ‘creation’ and ‘combination.’ He often used the word ‘create’ in Coleridge’s sense, and undoubtedly applied Coleridge’s theory, not his own, in all his best poems. (Stovall, “Poe’s Debt” 794)

Yet, although it makes no sense as a metaphor of Coleridge’s theory of poetic creation, the griffin makes perfect sense as an illustration of Poe’s theory. “Novel conceptions,” Poe writes:

are merely unusual combinations. The mind of man can imagine nothing which does not exist—if it could, it would create not only ideally, but substantially—as do the thoughts of God. It may be said— “We imagine a griffin, yet a griffin does not exist.” Not the griffin, certainly, but its component parts. It is no more than a collation of known limbs—features—qualities. Thus with all that claims to be new—which appears to be a *creation* of the intellect: —it is re-soluble into the old. The wildest effort of the mind cannot stand the test of analysis. (Poe, “American Prose Writers” 16)

Poe is not here talking of abstract ideal conceptions obscurely intuited in a state of half-consciousness. He is talking of concrete, recognizable conceptions imitated from his peers. And he did apply *his* theory to his own work. Just like a griffin is part lion, part eagle, so “Ligeia” is a combination of many preexistent literary conceptions, hence “re-soluble into the old.” Of course, for Poe, all literary productions are a recapitulation of the literature that precedes them—in a sense, therefore, one might say that his theory suggests the idea that all imaginative works of art develop an idea of literature—, but, according to him, not all writers are aware of this. I certainly think that Poe was much more aware of his debt to his predecessors than any other writer I know, and this sensibility is part of what makes “Ligeia” such a remarkable work of art.

Nothing in his tale was new. Everything about it would be vaguely familiar to the public, although it would take the reader a great effort, which he knew most readers would not make, to trace that feeling of familiarity to specific sources. The general public seeks entertainment and

would not, and as Poe saw it should not, be bothered with research and analysis. Thus, the reader not yet acquainted with the solution to the mystery of the tale reenacted the position of the narrator, who felt the mystery of his wife had some connection with certain “passages from books,” but could not define that connection (Poe, “Ligeia” 314).

This, then, is Poe’s secret. He had found a method to reconcile the apparently conflicting demands of familiarity and novelty. Indeed, all truly popular writers must find methods to deliver what the public expects in an unexpected way, and this was Poe’s way to do it. Indeed, I suspect great works of art are distinguished by the paradoxical feeling they inspire, which is perhaps best expressed by the word “uncanny:” they appear wholly new and original, but also so obvious and natural that we almost cannot bring ourselves to believe that they have not always been around. This is the feeling that informs the hackneyed adage that true poetry is eternal. In “The Poet” (1844), Emerson gives it a more elegant expression: “poetry was all written before time was” (552). But, as usual, Poe understood originality in a sense peculiar to himself. Many “regard as original in letters, only such combinations of thought, of incident, and so forth, as are, in fact, absolutely novel. It is clear, however, not only that it is the novelty of *effect* alone which is worth consideration, but that this effect is *best* wrought, for the end of all fictitious composition, pleasure, by shunning rather than by seeking the absolute novelty of combination” (Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1847] 580).

Thus, Poe understood originality, for the purposes of literature, also as an effect that was relative to the reader’s experience, not as an absolute quality: “the element of literary originality is novelty. The element of its appreciation by the reader is the reader’s sense of the new. Whatever gives him a new and insomuch a pleasurable emotion, he considers original, and whoever frequently gives him such emotion, he considers original” (Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1847] 579). Thus, Thomas Moore’s *Lalla Rookh* is not original: “the effect, originality, is not produced by it” (580). For Poe, “true originality—true in respect of its purposes—is that which, in bringing out the half-formed, the reluctant, or the unexpressed fancies of mankind, or in exciting the more delicate

impulses of the heart's passion, or in giving birth to some universal sentiment or instinct in embryo, thus combines with the pleasurable effect of *apparent* novelty, a real egotistic delight" (581).

This passage involves an insightful and sophisticated assessment of the psychology of reading. Absolute novelty humiliates the reader, by confronting him with the overwhelming superiority of the author's inventiveness. This is a very painful sensation that Poe thought never failed to inspire in the reader a repulsion for the work that produces it. Originality, however, in the peculiar sense Poe gave to the word, communicated the illusion of distinction, for the reader "feels and intensely enjoys the seeming novelty of the thought, enjoys it as really novel, as absolutely original with the writer—and himself. They two, he fancies, have, alone of all men, thought thus. They two have, together, created this thing. Henceforward there is a bond of sympathy between them, a sympathy which irradiates every subsequent page of the book" (581). These considerations on originality come from Poe's second review of *Twice-Told Tales*, written in 1847, by which time his theory had reached full maturity. In my estimation, these are some of the most extraordinary passages in Poe's work. They are also totally alien to the spirit of Romanticism. In a sense, indeed, Romantic theory allowed the reader to believe that the poem was, in a sense, his own creation—Poe, once again deflating the illusion, tells us that this feeling was an illusion.

Here Poe also offers a complete justification of his method. According to him, all art combines. Now, he follows up on that idea with the even bolder proposition that the "original" writer does not even present truly new combinations. The only reason why Hawthorne was considered original by many, was that "he differs in his manner or tone, and in his choice of subjects, from any author of their acquaintance—their acquaintance not extending to the German Tieck, whose manner, in *some* of his works, is absolutely identical with that *habitual* to Hawthorne" (Rev. of *Twice-Told Tales* [1847] 579). In the terms of his article, this is not derogatory to Hawthorne. Poe himself had, as we have seen, borrowed extensively from many different sources,

including a tale that many have supposed to be a translation from Tieck—the trick was to borrow from obscure sources, to obscure the borrowing, or do both things at once.

But to let the general public realise that the effect “originality” was obtained through imitation, of course, was out of the question. To acknowledge imitation would be to defraud the public of the expectations created by years of Romantic theory. A writer cannot afford to openly ridicule the idols of his readership. Hopefully, Poe’s inadmissible “superficial” meaning would be *too* superficial for that public; it would be as safe as the shadow in Rowena’s room. The inevitable recognition by the “analytical” would always come too late, and so would the identification of the many disparate stories of femicide, resurrection, and self-incrimination Poe had jumbled together into a seemingly “unified” but wonderfully absurd story.

Yet, at the same time, all his writing shows, I think, that he had no intention of letting his trick go permanently unnoticed. The roster of buried allusions is “Ligeia,” which is perhaps the most ostensibly “Romantic” of all his tales, makes it impossible to suppose Poe came up with his stories in a state of frenzy. They show us, instead, that he was what he understood by the word poet: a dissembler, a simulator, a trickster. I believe that throughout his entire career Poe staged what may be termed a Gothic conspiracy to expose the Romantic assumption of sincerity. Indeed, “Ligeia,” like most of his work, is a sort of literary Trojan horse. This is the point I will try to make in the rest of this chapter, in which I will attempt to clarify the most perplexing points of Poe’s plot by confronting them with Poe’s sources.



## 2— The Idea of Poison in “Ligeia”

One of the pillars of the false impression conveyed by “Ligeia” is the idea of poison. Yet, the critics who have argued before me that the narrator had killed one or both of his wives have always supposed this was one of the facts of the story. All these critics agreed that it was possible to sieve fact from delusion, or deliberate distortion. What makes this task so difficult, of course, is that our only source, the narrator, is remarkably unreliable. However, despite this, the narrator scrupulously adheres to the facts, and this is what makes it possible to detect his crime. The solution to this apparent contradiction is, again, involved in the matter of the shadow. Although the narrator deceives us, he never commits himself to what may be termed the “apparent thesis” of the tale, but induces the reader to make fallacious inferences that he never actually spells out. This is what Susan Amper called “weasel wording.” The literal meaning of those statements corresponds to the facts, and femicide—double femicide, to be more precise, is, I believe, the only story that fits those facts. But one cannot be too careful in parsing the literal meaning of the narrator’s statements, as opposed to what he gives the reader to understand. Therefore, even such deviations from strict literalness as would be insignificant in most contexts, lead, in “Ligeia,” to important misapprehensions.

In the 1944 article “The Interpretation of ‘Ligeia,’” Roy P. Basler was the first to argue that the narrator had killed Rowena. His account of her death as resulting from poisoning was then picked up, with slight revisions, by Donald N. Koster, Terrence Matheson, and Susan Amper, who argued that the narrator had *also* poisoned Ligeia. The greatest merit of Basler’s reading, in my opinion, is that it acknowledges the most important formal trait of the tale: the absence of an explicit *dénouement*. He remarks that the tale ends with a climax, which leaves everything unresolved, and from which the reader derives no sense of closure: “If (...) the story is taken to be a rational narrative of the quasi-supernatural told by a man in his right mind, the conclusion is not a conclusion but a climax, the proper denouement of which would be the corpse’s reassumption of

Rowena's lineaments and its final lapse into certain death, recognized this time as complete and final by the mind of the hero," which is the conclusion Poe himself indicated to Cooke in his letter on "Ligeia" (Basler, "The Interpretation" 370). Basler argues that this should be taken as a sign that the reader must find by his or her means the hidden consistency to which the ominous inconsistencies of the narrator's tale add up. Poe himself, as we have seen, had stated in his review of *Barnaby Rudge* that it was only artistically legitimate for a writer to intimate a crime when the object was to let the reader discover it. But Basler's explanation is not much more satisfactory than the narrator's. This is perhaps owing to his overriding conviction, which he shares with most other critics, that Poe was an instinctive writer: "Perhaps the intention in the story was not entirely clear and rationalized in his [Poe's] own mind, preoccupied as he was with the very ideas and obsessions which motivate the hero of the story" (371). I have already argued that this conviction results from the kind of circular reasoning that prompts critics to dismiss the evidence that Poe did not take his narrator seriously. Since he was not entirely convinced that Poe was not unconsciously sympathetic with his narrator, therefore, Basler's thesis presents his solution to the mystery in a somewhat hesitant, even apologetic fashion.

Despite his misgivings, he was one of, if not the first, to present a natural solution to the mystery of the tale. His hypothesis is that the narrator poisoned his second wife with a view to use her "deserted quarters," as Philip Pendleton Cooke put it, to house the spirit of his Ligeia (Cooke). Basler supposes, however, that, as indicated by Poe's letter, the narrator had not been successful in his attempt to bring back Ligeia, and therefore that the ghosts in the bridal chamber were hallucinations, more exactly, "wish-projections arising from the narrator's obsession with the idea of resurrecting Ligeia in the body of Rowena" (Basler, "The Interpretation" 368).

This theory perpetuates a common misconception. The conventional interpretation of the tale regarded the return of Ligeia as a case of actual, Basler of *apparent* metempsychosis. But this irons out one of the most singular aspects of the case. The narrator may have had metempsychosis

on his mind—his idea of “the spirit still hovering” about Rowena’s corpse shows that it was consistent with his views on the subject—; he may even have desired it; but what he thinks happened can in no way be described as metempsychosis—apparent or actual (Poe, “Ligeia” 327).

The narrator is convinced that the body of Rowena magically transformed into the entombed Ligeia. That is not metempsychosis, but transmutation.<sup>73</sup> Whatever it was, he could not explain it, and neither could Philip Pendleton Cooke, who called it, as we have seen, a “violation of the ghostly proprieties” (Cooke). Poe himself, in his reply to Cooke’s letter dated September 21, 1839, stated that the “*gradual* perception of the fact that Ligeia lives again in the person of Rowena, is a far loftier and more thrilling idea than the one I have embodied,” pointing out the differences between “Ligeia” and “Morella:” “Do you remember, there, the *gradual* conviction on the part of the parent that the spirit of the first Morella tenants the person of the second? (*Letters* 193, Letter 82). Poe’s statement is important in that it points out that the emphasis of fiction, or at least his fiction, is the representation of a character’s convictions, as distinct from the actual events. In other words, he depicts the character’s peculiar relationship with the facts of his story. This is arguably the theme of virtually all his fiction.

But the highlighting of the word “gradual” is misleading—that is not the point of comparison. The narrators of these tales both *gradually* form the conviction that their dead wives have taken the place of their successors; what differs is the particular aspect this conviction assumes in each of the two tales. In “Morella,” the narrator believes he witnessed a phenomenon of metempsychosis, the definition of which is contained in Poe’s sentence regarding that tale. In “Ligeia,” on the other hand, Poe points out the incontrovertible fact that, unlike his predecessor, the narrator of that tale does *not* believe that Ligeia “lives again in the person of Rowena;” on the contrary, he believes she appeared *in her own* person (emphasis mine). Thereby, Poe slyly points out

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<sup>73</sup> R. C. De Prosopo has stressed the singularity of Ligeia’s supposed transformation in his article “Whose/Who’s Ligeia?:” “the narrator’s and Ligeia’s mutual efforts to will her eternal reincarnation yield (...) not just a body-host—Poe could easily have had the spirit of Ligeia metempsychose itself, “Metzengerstein”-fashion, into Rowena’s flesh, rather than re-embody Ligeia cell-by-cell at the end—but carrion, the dead meat of Rowena metabolized by Ligeia’s spirit as the condition of Ligeia’s return” (61).

to Cooke that the “violation of the ghostly proprieties” is integral to his conception, and that it constitutes the peculiarity that distinguishes it from the earlier tale.

By overlooking this “violation,” which is the whole point of the tale, Basler obscures the cause of the narrator’s perplexity. Besides, though the apparition of Ligeia in the end of the tale may not have been totally unexpected to him, it was evidently not, as Basler implies, what he had wished for. The narrator reacts rather as if he had “seen” his worst fears come true. There is also another minor imprecision—but one which will also prove very significant—in Basler’s terminology. He refers to the “ghosts” in Rowena’s room as “hallucinations,” not illusions, thereby tacitly ruling out the phantasmagoria in the room as a possible explanation.

In fact, by treating the wonders in Rowena’s room as “hallucinations,” Basler completely discredits the evidence he produces in support of the thesis that Rowena had been poisoned. This evidence was very feeble to begin with: some “drops” the narrator himself is not sure he saw. The narrator claims the drops appeared magically from an invisible source in the atmosphere of the room—this is undoubtedly the best available evidence that the narrator was delirious. In other words, if the drops are not an “hallucination”—as Basler puts it—than, surely, nothing is. Even the narrator thought at the time that he might have been hallucinating: “I saw, or may have dreamed that I saw, fall within the goblet (...) three of four large drops” (Poe, “Ligeia” 325). Surprisingly, however, this is the one point on which Basler doubts the narrator’s testimony. The only time he actually admits he may have been hallucinating we are told he was either lying *or* adapting the poison “into the pattern of hallucination” (Basler, “The Interpretation” 69). Thus, Basler cripples his own argument to mistrust the narrator’s perceptions by admitting an exception, while at the same time allowing that argument to corrode the credibility of the only evidence of poisoning. As a result, he effectively defeats his own case.

Besides, the “drops” are the culmination of a scene described in great detail, all of which is entirely inconsistent with Basler’s explanation. Suffice it to say, at this point, that the narrator was

sitting on a nearby ottoman when he noticed the ghostly drops. If, as Basler supposes, the narrator poured that liquid himself, then he must be wrong, or lying, not just about those elusive drops, but about everything else. And if he was just making stuff up, how can we ever hope to make any sense of what he says. Susan Amper would later maintain that the narrator deliberately lied to divert suspicion—but surely, if this was his purpose, he could have come up with something a little more convincing.

Indeed, Amper counts “Ligeia” among the examples of “Poe’s use of lying narrators,” although, in effect, she actually portrays him as consciously attempting to convey a false impression through what she calls “weasel wording,” which is, of course, a strategy that allows one to mislead without actually lying (Amper, “Masters of Deceit” 110). Furthermore, despite including the narrator of “Ligeia” in this group, Amper actually hints that, in this particular case, a conscious intent to deceive may not account for all of the narrator’s inaccuracies. “The narrator,” she writes, “is trying to hide from us and perhaps from himself the truth about his relationship with” Ligeia (122). Her claim that “Poe’s method” was akin to that employed by authors of Gothic parodies, particularly “[Thomas Love] Peacock’s strategy in *Nightmare Abbey*, in which the characters, in narrating their own stories of horror and sensation, actually succeed in spooking themselves” has the same tendency (101). The way I see it, despite having the intention of misleading the reader, the narrator *never* actually lies. He deliberately omits, weasel-words, or unwittingly misinterprets reality. But his statements appear to be almost always literally valid, which allows the reader to reconstruct the actual circumstances which the narrator was either hiding or unable to perceive. In any event, Amper does not explicitly address the “ruby drops” that fall on Rowena’s wine, though, as we shall see, she indirectly acknowledges that these are connected with Ligeia, whom she maintains was poisoned.

The drops are, I think, the second most decisive detail to the understanding of the narrator’s frame of mind after he had seen the shadow. But, in this as in all other instances, in order accurately

to describe what goes on in his head, one must be very careful not to distort his statements, or put words in his mouth. The narrator himself recognises that these drops did not *feel* real but is convinced that their reality had to be inferred from their supposed effect, that is, the death of Rowena. Basler accepts this argument—after all, *something* must have killed Rowena. But the inference would only be valid where no other cause of death could be admitted, which is not the case at all.

The victim had been slowly languishing under the unwholesome phantasmagoric influence of the chamber in which her husband had placed her. In fact, the narrator upbraids her family for having “permitted to pass the threshold of an apartment so bedecked, a maiden and a daughter so beloved,” thus indirectly acknowledging that the room would be the death of her, and that this would have been obvious to her relatives, had their judgement not been clouded by the prospect of financial gain (Poe, "Ligeia" 321). It appears to have been pretty obvious to *him*, at least, and that I suppose is what really counts. Basler himself indirectly admits that the “drops” were not needed to explain Rowena’s death because the narrator was terrorising her to death: “Impatient for results and fearful that the apparent progress of Rowena’s hysteria and physical collapse will not suffice, (...) he has resorted to actual poison” (369). Thus, despite the fact that the evidence about which the narrator is certain would have been enough to convict him for the murder of his wife, if not in a court of law at least in the reader’s eyes, Basler chooses to uphold his only defense, the preposterous drops, about which the narrator is himself uncertain, actually making his whole case rest on that flimsiest of evidences when he had a wealth of incontrovertible fact that would serve his purpose much more effectively. To put it more simply, instead of attempting to prove the obvious crime, that the narrator was killing Rowena, he attempts instead to prove he *poisoned* her.

Basler, of course, thought that he had no choice but to involve his thesis in contradiction. He felt, like I do, that there was some hidden consistency to be discovered in the apparent chaos. Consistency being, at the same time, his axiom and his hypothesis, he could not afford to leave the

“drops” out of the picture. Indeed, by definition—by Poe’s definition that is—, they must perform some function in the plot, understood as “*that from which no component atom can be removed,*” or even so much as “*displaced, without ruin to the whole*” (Poe, *Brevities* 1:469).<sup>74</sup> Therefore, explaining the drops became his priority. Paradoxically, then, Basler’s strikingly inconsistent hypothesis was advanced in the name of consistency.

I think Basler’s reasoning was sound, but his formulation of the problem was incorrect because he missed a crucial bit of information: there are two murders in the tale, one hidden, the other manifest. Having never questioned the narrator’s love for Ligeia, nor her idolatrous devotion to her weird husband, he never suspected him of killing her *too*. Therefore, in order to justify his intuition, Basler had to fit the “drops” into the story of Rowena’s death if he had to force them into place—which he ultimately did. He treated the obvious crime as if it had been hidden because he did not realise that the ghostly clues were pointing to another crime; he exculpated the narrator from this obvious crime, by upholding his cover—the ghostly drops—because he saw no other way to account for them.

In 2005, in “Poe’s Visual Tricks,” Barbara Cantalupo recovered Basler’s basic reading of the tale, correcting many of its most obvious shortcomings. Cantalupo describes the “transformation” of Rowena into Ligeia as an optical illusion, “the result of an aerial projection put in place by the narrator himself, but ‘forgotten’ due to his opium-enhanced state,” a “re-imaging of her [Ligeia’s] triumph over death by using a device of ‘natural magic’” similar to those described by David Brewster in *Letters on Natural Magic* (1832) (“Poe’s Visual Tricks” 58, 59). Cantalupo, however, did not accept the thesis, proposed by Koster, Matheson, and Amper, that the narrator had killed Ligeia, and therefore describes the final tableau in the tale as a “scene of mourning,” remarking that “the layering of a loved one’s loss unto the death of another often takes place, whether or not the mourner consciously wishes this to happen. (...) As the plot unfolds, the narrator sees, much to his

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<sup>74</sup> See p. 236 above.

despair, that even with her admirable store of esoteric knowledge, Ligeia cannot conjure the willful resistance to death that the epigraph promises” (60-61). This reading takes for granted the narrator’s love for Ligeia, thus indirectly validating his depiction of her as a witch.

Cantalupo also avoids commitment on the subject of the reality of the “mysterious” drops:

The narrator ascribes to the mystical appearance of the ‘ruby-drops’ that fall into her wine goblet. (...) the narrator’s depiction of his sudden horror at seeing the final transformation makes the means of Rowena’s death and Ligeia’s ascension appear fantastic. Yet this uncertainty is itself illusory, based on *our* forgetting (or not seeing) the narrator’s role in producing ‘the phantasmagoric chamber’ with its anamorphic potential. (“Poe’s Visual Tricks” 60)

This passage seems to suggest, indeed, that the illusion the narrator created was itself instrumental in bringing about Rowena’s death, but this is never directly stated in Cantalupo’s text. Moreover, no specific explanation for the presence of the “drops” is provided. As all other “phantasmagoric” effects, they are attributed to a supposed “anamorphic” effect. The most important contribution of this article to the discussion is, in my view, the emphasis it places on the “narrator’s role as both agent and recipient of these delusional perceptions” (Cantalupo, “Poe’s Visual Tricks” 60).

Donald N. Koster, Terrence Matheson, and more recently Susan Amper, inferred that the narrator killed both his wives. This, of course, provided an alternate explanation for the ruby liquid. Indeed, all these authors admitted its connection with the death of Ligeia. Surprisingly, however, their explanation of the second crime remained basically that of Basler. They insisted that the “drops” were both real and imaginary; based on this conviction, they did not doubt that Rowena had been poisoned, but added that Ligeia had *probably* been poisoned *too*, thus adding an extra layer of inconsistency to their interpretations.



Donald N. Koster, who in 1973 first advanced the double murder thesis in “Poe, Romance and Reality,” indeed, still felt perfectly confident that Rowena had been *poisoned* to make room for the spirit of Ligeia:

Whether he [the narrator] has embarked on a calculated course of poison by means of a drug difficult to detect (his knowledge of drugs may be inferred from his direct statement that he has done ‘no little medical reading’) or has planned a slower but even more horrifying course of breaking her down by increasing doses of terror is not clear. But that he finally succumbs to impatience and ends her life with a massive potion of poison appears evident from the episode of the ruby drops in the wine prescribed by her physicians” (12).

Underlying this passage is the same circular, self-confirming argument to which Basler’s—and the narrator’s—interpretation boils down. The drops were there because Rowena was poisoned—although she was already dying; Rowena was poisoned because the drops were there. As regards Koster’s secondary argument, the narrator does indeed claim he is well-read in medicine, but in another context, to show he was qualified to perform restorative manoeuvres on the seemingly reviving Rowena. In any event, Koster failed to realise that immediately after his boast the narrator demonstrates the falsity of his claim by making a major medical blunder, as we shall see below—a blunder which his own appeal to medical literature makes significant. In any case, the narrator’s boast was not what convinced Koster that Rowena had been poisoned—this was only an afterthought. The only real evidence was, as always, the “evident” drops, which Koster was as anxious to explain as Basler had been.

In 1982, Terrence J. Matheson recovered the double murder thesis in “The Multiple Murders in ‘Ligeia:’ A New Look at Poe’s Narrator,” basically recapping Basler’s and Koster’s argument. Rowena must have been poisoned, “how else do we explain those ruby drops that go into her wine?” (Matheson, “Multiple Murders” 286). Like his predecessors, Matheson is more certain about

those drops than the narrator himself, who admits he may have imagined them. Indeed, before the drops can be of any use for the purpose of explaining Rowena's death, one must first establish that they are not imaginary. Indeed, since there is a perfectly plausible explanation for the death of Rowena, the fact of the narrator "seeing" or "dreaming" that he had seen those drops, in itself, does not allow the inference that poison was involved.

Koster and Matheson, of course, had at their disposal an alternative explanation for the drops that had not been available to Basler—they could have had something to do with the hidden murder of Ligeia, a subject about which the narrator is less than forthcoming. But these writers thought the evidence for this was somehow weaker. As Koster put it, "the exact cause of Ligeia's death is less certain, probably because the narrator is unwilling to admit it even to himself, just as he will not admit that he killed Rowena by poisoning her wine" ("Poe, Romance and Reality" 11). I find this a very unconvincing argument. It relies on an inconsistent, and psychologically implausible representation of the narrator's character. This is a man who does not scruple to confess that he hated his second wife, and even that he was killing her by degrees, yet, Koster wants us to believe he could not bear to tell us he had *poisoned* her. His "probably," however, shows that he did not have much confidence in the thesis himself.

Koster also relies on Basler for his interpretation of the climax of the tale, as the following passage makes apparent:

The conclusion is, of course, inevitable. That the narrator, mad even by his own confession (...) should find his desire fulfilled by Ligeia's seeming return to life in the body of the dead Rowena is to be wondered at no more than is his transference of the achievement of the whole 'miracle' from himself to Ligeia. Only thus can he be absolved of the guilt in the murder of Rowena; only thus can he expiate his crime against Ligeia. (Koster, "Poe, Romance and Reality" 12)

But, as I have before noted, Ligeia *did not* come back in the body of Rowena. The rest of the quotation, however, highlights a fact that had been obscured by Basler's argumentation. The drops perform, even in the straight reading of the tale, a very specific function: they absolve the narrator of the guilt of killing Rowena. This idea would later be developed by Susan Amper: "His wife lies dead, poisoned. He says he did not do it: he thinks perhaps his former wife, come back from the dead, did it, but he cannot be sure, poor soul, because he is an opium addict and not in control of his faculties. 'Ligeia,' then, is this man's cover story" ("Masters of Deceit" 117). However, if it were not for the idea of poison, nothing could have prevented us from screaming murder right from the start. Her husband was terrorising Rowena to death and all indicates that she could not long survive the influences of the chamber. Ever since she entered the fateful room, she had been getting ever weaker, and more nervous. In fact, she had already narrowly survived an attack from which "her frame, at all times feeble, never altogether recovered" (Poe, "Ligeia" 324). All indicates that her justified terror aggravated her disease—that this *was*, in fact, her disease. For we know she feared her husband, and with good reason.

The miraculous appearance of the drops seems to save the narrator from actually killing this woman, whom he hated and kept in an indoors tomb. Or should we say that it spared him the trouble of having to go through with his plan? In any case, she certainly would not be missed. This story—the story of visionary poison—is, of course, as implausible as Rowena's death by terror is plausible (on this score, let us recall that the wife of Dickens' "madman," whose life parallels Rowena in so many important respects, died of a nervous breakdown, caused by her surprising her husband as he was about to stab her, and exacerbated by his successful campaign to convince her doctors that *she*, the victim of the "madman," was herself going mad). The narrator's cover is, in short, preposterous—but, come to think of it, so is the accusation that he *poisoned* Rowena.

It appears to me that Koster, Matheson, and Amper were too impressed with the idea of poison to realise exactly how right they were. Diverting our attention is what Poe does best. The

secret to creating a good puzzle is intimating a complicated solution when the answer is simplicity itself. It is not easier to prove that the narrator poisoned Rowena than it was to prove that Ligeia did it. The evidence for poison is as “ghostly” as the evidence for the return of Ligeia itself—for the most part, it is exactly the same evidence. On the other hand, the narrator was evidently, in fact admittedly, terrorising Rowena to death. If the narrator was killing Rowena and had killed Ligeia too, why should we persist in “proving” his cover? The thing could not be more obvious, but, again, Poe manages to channel our conjectures in an unprofitable direction. *No one* poisoned Rowena! It was Ligeia that the narrator poisoned. Well, he did not exactly poison her either, but then he never actually said the “drops” were poison—we just assumed it, from their connection with the death of Rowena, though, according to the narrator, she did not exactly die.

Considered in connection with death of Rowena, then, the “drops” are a supererogatory clue to an inexistent mystery. This is why the poison thesis never stuck. Ligeia’s death, not Rowena’s, is what requires explanation. And, if the plot is what Poe said it should be, we may be certain that the phantasmagoric hints in Rowena’s room are there to explain what needs explaining. They will fill the huge gaps in the first part of the tale. Of course, we could never jump to this conclusion in the real world. Unlike the real world, however, a tale is, or should be, according to Poe, a well-defined organised and intelligible whole, with clearly perceptible boundaries, a beginning and an end. The beauty of such a unified system is that our axiom is also a hypothesis, which can be tested and proved. If it is at all possible to obtain a consistent literal interpretation by referring the “wonders” in Rowena’s room to the death of Ligeia, then, that interpretation will be the true story of “Ligeia,” no matter what the narrator says.

Indeed, the consistency of the poetical work of art—what Poe calls the “plot”—is the characteristic that enabled “transcendentalist” thinkers like Emerson to use it as a symbol of Nature itself, which they believed was as consistent as a poem. Indeed, in his first published book, *Nature* (1836), Emerson wrote: “All science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature. (...) Whenever

a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence. Its test is, that it will explain all phenomena” (Emerson, *Nature* 493). Whether this holds true of Nature must remain a matter of conjecture, or rather faith, as no single individual can ever hope to get the whole picture; but this is demonstrably true of a consistent “plot:” the theory that leaves nothing unexplained proves itself—for, if the writer’s design is sound, there can be only *one* way of explaining all that needs explaining. What I am trying to provide here is a sketch of that total theory of Ligeia, that is, a sketch of the true story.

J. Gerald Kennedy’s article “Poe, ‘Ligeia,’ and the Problem of Dying Women” deserves a final mention here. Though concurring with Thompson’s widely accepted theory that the tale was undecidable, this critic almost hit on what I believe is the truth about Ligeia. Regarding the narrator’s behaviour after her death, and during his second marriage, he writes:

Rowena is from the outset a sacrificial figure, a random victim of the narrator’s own confused need to prove his devotion to Ligeia while avenging his abandonment by her. (...) Displacing the outrage he feels for the dead woman who has left him to languish, he projects on Rowena all his unconscious resentment of Ligeia. (...) If the “(...) drops (...)” which fall into Rowena’s goblet actually represent the man’s effort to poison his wife, as Basler has argued, we witness here a confused attempt to kill two women at once: the perfidious Ligeia and her unworthy successor. (...) Simultaneously longing for his dead first wife and wishing to avenge her rejection, he watches over the “corpse” of Rowena with a “turbulent violence” of emotion, recalling “the whole of that unutterable wo (...) with which [he] had regarded [Ligeia] thus enshrouded.” Since the second “death” is a willed reenactment of the first, he gazes on Rowena’s body with “a bosom full of bitter thoughts of the one only and supremely beloved.” (“Poe, ‘Ligeia’” 124)

Kennedy thus addresses some important issues that had been wholly ignored by previous criticism of the tale. I believe, however, that the key to the problem is the “effect of confused time,”

to use Benjamin Franklin Fisher's phrase ("Dickens and Poe" 14). The seemingly extraordinary events in Rowena's room are a *ghostly* re-enactment of the actual murder of Ligeia by the narrator—this is, I think, the only solution that satisfactorily accounts for all that which does not quite add up in the tale. In fact, all those "ghostly" phenomena that cannot quite be fitted into the story of Rowena, are easily referable to the death of Ligeia. And, once the wonders are out of the way, it becomes absolutely clear that the narrator wilfully murdered Rowena, not by poison, but by phantasmagoria. This, then, is what I call the obvious crime in the tale, for it is committed, as it were, in plain sight, but obscured by a mass of inadmissible phantasmagoric evidence.

### 3 — An Obvious Crime: The Murder of Rowena

No matter how we look at them, the “wonders” in Rowena’s room cannot be fitted into the natural explanation of her death to which the rest of the evidence—the natural facts with no hint of the supernatural about them—point. Yet, according to the narrator, the “wonders” cannot be dismissed from the picture either. To him, they are also facts. Facts that admit no explanation. But this conclusion is marred by a methodological error. The narrator confuses his interpretation of the facts with the facts themselves.

The ruby liquid is, without doubt, the pivot of the narrator’s theory. All subsequent events will be interpreted by him by reference to that particular detail, which, paradoxically, is the only thing about that night about which he was initially uncertain. Indeed, at the time, they had not *felt* real to him and he therefore initially dismissed them as a figment of his imagination. Incidentally, this is his justification for never having mentioned the mysterious drops to Rowena. On the face of it, this does not look good for his theory.

In reality, the narrator actually renders his narrative more credible by employing a strategy typical of real-life humbugs. By reporting his doubts about one of the crucial “facts” on which his thesis rests, the narrator comes across as a methodical, rational, and altogether trustworthy individual. This makes it seem that he was not the kind of gullible visionary that would be easily deceived by appearances, or worse, a charlatan. Making a great show of scrupulousness, he concedes that his theory could not be proven, of course, but claims to have adopted it only after having thoroughly satisfied himself that the phenomena he witnessed could not be explained. He was, of course, sadly mistaken, but, because he appears both honest and cautious, the reader is likely to take him at his word. Meanwhile, as I have said before, he appears to scrupulously adhere to the facts, and this is what enables us ultimately to deconstruct his theory. Once the core of fact is

extracted from the narrator's statements, we realise there is nothing unexplainable about his experience.

Even before the fall of the drops, the narrator was misinterpreting what went on around him. He claims, indeed, that that wonderful fact—for he takes it as such—was announced by what he regarded as three equally wonderful signs. As he “hastened across the chamber to procure” his new wife some wine, he was delayed by “two circumstances of a startling nature:” “I had felt that some palpable although invisible object had passed lightly by my person; and I saw that there lay upon the golden carpet (...) a shadow;” then, he gave Rowena her wine, and resumed his seat, he tells us, in “an ottoman near me, with my eyes fastened upon her person” (Poe, "Ligeia" 325). Just as she was about to drink her wine, before the fluid supposedly materialised out of thin air into the glass, he “became distinctly aware of a gentle foot-fall upon the carpet, and near the couch” (Poe, "Ligeia" 325). Trifling in themselves, in the aggregate these three details, which the narrator found so “startling,” are strongly suggestive of the reality of the supernatural drops.

However, his doubts about the latter contrast with the certainty he attaches to the other three circumstances. The irony is, of course, that there is no reason to doubt them because they are not unexpected in the least, but exactly what was to be expected. In fact, taken individually, the three signs can be explained away very easily. The narrator is absolutely certain of having seen a shadow under the censer, and he is sure his senses did not deceive him. He must have *seen* it—this is that shadow of which my reader has already heard so much about, the absence of which would be a violation of the laws of physics. He is equally certain of having felt some “palpable but invisible object” passing him by. If this were a riddle, the answer would be obvious. Could it be the wind the narrator felt? Perhaps “that strong continual current of wind behind the draperies” which gave “a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole,” often mentioned by the narrator, and to which he refers Rowena's illusions (Poe, "Ligeia" 323)? I can see no reason not to refer his own perception to the same cause. Evidently, the reason why he did not adopt this hypothesis was that his mind was



already strongly predisposed to the supernatural. In the very last paragraph of the tale, he practically confirms our suspicion by carelessly alluding to “the rushing atmosphere of the chamber,” but, by the time we read this, we are too busy chasing the ghost of Ligeia to notice the significance of this information (330). The circumstance, then, of feeling an invisible object passing lightly by him might have been unexpected in another scenario—but not in the phantasmagoria the narrator had prepared.

A “gentle foot-fall” is scarcely more unexpected. It appears to be another typical phantasmagoric effect. The narrator was “distinctly aware” of the sound, and we have no reason to doubt he heard *some* noise. He construed it as a step, but he knew that was impossible—hence his alarm. There was no one but the ailing Rowena and himself in the room, and both were motionless at the time. In any case, he saw no one in the region from which the sound had apparently issued. Yet, he was evidently convinced that it *was* a footstep—therefore, he suggests, some invisible person must have been about—and who could this be but Ligeia? This, at least, is the impression he conveys to the reader.

This time, however, the testimony of the narrator is corroborated by Rowena’s—another seldom noticed fact. That is, she does not confirm the presence of that particular sound, but, since the beginning of her so-called illness, Rowena “spoke of sounds, and of motions, in and about the chamber of the turret,” which she evidently could not explain; the narrator, however, dismissed her complaints, concluding they “had no origin save in the distemper of her fancy, or perhaps in the phantasmagoric influences of the chamber itself” (Poe, “Ligeia” 323-24). The only extraordinary thing about this passage is the narrator’s reluctance to explain away his own disturbing impressions by the same reasoning. He goes on to report that, after a brief recovery, the “disease” took once again hold of his wife: “She spoke again, and now more frequently and pertinaciously, of the sounds — of the slight sounds — and of the unusual motions among the tapestries to which she had formerly alluded” (324). Finally, just before the narrator saw but his own shadow without

recognising it, his wife mentioned for the last time those sights and sounds which he “could not *all* believe” were “the natural effects of that customary rushing of the wind” (325).

Why not? Rowena could not have known that the sights and sounds she mentioned *could* have been the “natural effects” of a phantasmagoric machinery the existence of which she must have ignored. Evidently, the narrator decided not to tell her, or her doctors, about that machinery, which afforded a natural explanation for the strange goings-on in the room. Indeed, his description of her condition as “excitability by trivial causes of fear” is, under the circumstances, simply preposterous (Poe, “Ligeia” 324). He must mean the phantasmagoria itself. But, although this might have been a “trivial cause of fear” to him, it would have not been so to Rowena, who evidently did not know what was causing the curtains to wave and the slight noises in the room.

But what is the narrator’s excuse to reject in his own case an explanation which he admits is both probably and sufficient? He prepared a “phantasmagoric effect,” and that is precisely what he and Rowena experience. They *both* speak of sounds and motions that suggest the presence of a disembodied spirit. This, of course, is the very object of a phantasmagoria. Therefore, their impressions are not only what was to be expected, but the end towards which the narrator admittedly directed his efforts as a decorator. *If* Rowena had confirmed his report—if, that is, she had heard the same “foot-fall,” and seen the same drops—we might have had some reason to suspect that these things were not illusions. Their diverging testimonies, however, agree on one point only: they heard and saw strange things that suggested the room was haunted. This fact, of course, strengthens the supposition that they were, indeed, suffering the “influence” of the chamber. Yet, the narrator appears to be fooled by his own trick.

Even before Rowena’s decline supposedly proved to him the reality of the drops, indeed even before the ruby liquid presented itself to his consciousness—for this is the factual truth beyond which he is careful not to state anything—he was already under the impression that the three “startling circumstances” that preceded it were not illusions. But, unlike Rowena, he had strong

reasons to believe that was exactly what they were. Yet, though he dismissed *her* complaints on that account, it never even occurred to him that his mind was playing tricks on him. He already half-believed that Ligeia might return, and this *idée fixe* made him jumble the shadow, the wind, and a muffled sound that resembled a step into a unified impression. Overlooking the obvious natural explanations for each of these occurrences, he imagined something, or someone was there with him that was palpable, yet visible only to the extent that it projected a shadow. When he heard the “foot-fall,” he immediately associated it with that certain something, or someone—who or what could this be *but* Ligeia? Indeed, his contention that it was a “foot-fall” is itself evidently conjectural, for he did not actually see anyone *walking*. Besides he must have had very sensitive ears if he could distinguish a “gentle foot-fall,” on a carpeted floor, with all that rustling going on around him (Poe, “Ligeia” 325 emphasis mine).

In short, the narrator’s thesis rests on the flimsiest of evidences. It could not have convinced, I think, anyone who was not already a believer in the supernatural. And, by a few well-placed hints, the narrator has, by that point, already infected the reader with his superstition, or predisposition to believe that supernatural intervention was the only way to account for the circumstances he describes. The motto of the tale, repeated by Ligeia in her death bed, for example, is suggestive of immortality. Besides this, there are other small details that intimate that Ligeia was, as it were, more than mortal. She had, for example, the ghost-like ability of getting into closed rooms without making a noise: “I would in vain attempt to portray the majesty, the quiet ease, of her demeanor, or the incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall. She came and departed as a shadow. I was never made aware of her entrance into my closed study save by the dear music of her low sweet voice, as she placed her marble hand upon my shoulder” (“Ligeia” 311).

Appealing to a conventional sentimental trope, the narrator suggests that the idealised woman’s *material* presence was slight. Even in life, she was so delicate that it appeared to him that she was precariously poised between the world of spirits and the world of flesh. She had been *like* a

shadow, and, by metonymical association, the narrator immediately thought of her when he saw a *shadow*, forgetting himself in the process. And, by having us chase a ghost from the start, he makes us forget all about him too.

The shadow is, it must be granted, very suggestive. So much so, indeed, that we get sidetracked. Once again, Poe deftly diverts our attention from what really matters. In other words, he successfully confines the reader to a unified supernatural impression that precludes analysis of specific details. The ghost-like Ligeia “came and departed as a shadow;” and that is precisely why it could not have been her in Rowena’s room. A “footfall” had never before betrayed to the narrator the approach of Ligeia, so incomprehensibly stealthy was she. This, then, would have been the first time he heard her coming. Perhaps she who had been so spare in person in her living days had put on some weight since her death? Thus, the very fact that suggested to the narrator that Ligeia was not of this world, should have showed him that her ghost was *not* in Rowena’s room. This is another notable instance of the tragi-comical functional blindness of the narrator.

The blindness of the reader, like that of the narrator, results from the powerful unified impression that those three “startling circumstances” make. The narrator’s overriding superstition determined his interpretation; likewise, the reader is made to expect something extraordinary, and, for that reason, overlooks the huge holes in the theory he gently leads us to adopt. It is in this spirit of credulity that we receive the ruby drops. We are ready to admit the impossible.

But the narrator’s instincts were right about those other “wonders;” perhaps he was correct in distrusting the drops too. Perhaps he saw something that could be confused with ruby liquid? This is certainly a plausible hypothesis. Here I must appeal to the reader’s imagination. The huge censer that illuminated the room had “many perforations, so contrived that there writhed in and out of them, as if endued with a serpent vitality, a continual succession of parti-colored fires” (Poe, “Ligeia” 321). The reflections produced by this capricious, constantly changing lighting on the golden background of the fabric that was virtually everywhere in the room, and which was itself

permanently in motion, could, I think, very easily have been confused with drops of liquid. In any event, in that scenario, the narrator could not be certain that what he “saw” was not another natural effect of the phantasmagoric machinery. Basler, as we have seen, claims that the narrator “adapted” the liquid “into the pattern of hallucination;” on the contrary, it appears to me that he projected his dream into the phantasmagoria (“Interpretation” 369). I suppose that at this point the aggregate impression was too strong to be resisted and the narrator combined the idea of the ruby fluid with the palpable but invisible presence, without realising his interpretations of the facts were being suggested by his imagination which, as we all know, was constantly taking him back to Ligeia. In all likelihood, then, the narrator’s predisposition to “see” Ligeia return shaped the individual phantasmagoric effects of the chamber into her semblance—Rowena, of course, never mentioned Ligeia. It must be granted, at the very least, that this possibility cannot be ruled out, and therefore, we are not constrained to admit the impossible.

On his part, the narrator thought the phantasmagoria might have been inspiring supernatural apprehensions on his wife, but never seriously believed this could be happening to him too. Like Basler, he assesses the situation in terms of a simple alternative between “seeing” and “dreaming;” or between reality and hallucination. But this alternative takes the phantasmagoria out of the equation, and with it the only viable natural explanation of all the seemingly wonderful occurrences that the narrator found so disturbing. The *DSM-V* defines “hallucination” as a “perception-like experience with the clarity and impact of a true perception but without the external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ” (American Psychiatric Association). The narrator’s impressions, on the other hand, may all be referred to some real sensory stimulus and, therefore, should be regarded as illusions.

But, once the idea of supernatural intervention was established in the narrator’s mind, each succeeding circumstance he could not explain appeared to confirm the reality of the previous “wonders.” But this impression was, like his inability to recognise what really was happening to

him, actually the result of a process of self-delusion that continues even after Rowena's death. When he finally became convinced that Rowena's body was coming back to life, he was already too far gone to realise this had been suggested by his quaint renovation work.

His impression that she was alive, of course, was contradicted when he touched the corpse. Each examination returned the same result: she was dead. But even this was no longer enough to convince him that his imagination, assisted by his phantasmagoria, was evoking vivid images from the past. Rowena, of course, never did revive. At the end of the tale, at the culmination of what he terms a "hideous drama of revivification," the narrator becomes convinced that *something* did at last rise from the bed—but that was not Rowena, he is quite certain of that ("Ligeia" 327). His exact words are, as usual, very confusing. In the straight reading of the tale, this confusion is often dismissed as a symptom of sorrow—but there is more to it than that:

The corpse, I repeat, stirred, and now more vigorously than before. The hues of life flushed up with unwonted energy into the countenance—the limbs relaxed—and, save that the eyelids were yet pressed heavily together, and that the bandages and draperies of the grave still imparted their charnel character to the figure, I might have dreamed that Rowena had indeed shaken off, utterly, the fetters of Death. But if this idea was not, even then, altogether adopted, I could at least doubt no longer, when, arising from the bed, tottering, with feeble steps, with closed eyes, and with the manner of one bewildered in a dream, the thing that was enshrouded advanced palpably and bodily into the middle of the apartment. ("Ligeia" 329)

Let us pause to reconsider this passage, part of which we have already encountered in the first chapter of this dissertation. He saw an "enshrouded" figure rising from the bed—why, may we ask, was the idea that Rowena was alive not "altogether adopted" then? Who or what else could this be? Here it becomes clearer than ever before that the "apparition" of Ligeia did not convince the narrator that she had returned: evidently, he was already intimately convinced that she would come.

His pre-established belief—or rather, his faith—that Ligeia would come back appears rather to have engendered its own imaginary confirmation. The figure that advances to the “middle of the apartment”—that is, to that spot where the censer projected its “rich lustre,” and where the narrator had earlier in that night searched in vain for what could only have been his own shadow—will soon reveal itself. It was *all* Ligeia. The passage, however, betrays the narrator by the same kind of irony that we find all over Ligeia, and also in “Berenice.” He *might* have dreamed that *Rowena* had come back to life, but he did not. Of course not, he “dreamed,” with a little help from the decoration, that *Ligeia* came back to life. Once again, the guilt-ridden, confused narrator unwittingly delivers to the reader the solution to the riddle he himself could not solve.

When he “saw” the “enshrouded” Ligeia rising from the bed instead of the “shrouded body” of Rowena, being already fully convinced of supernatural intervention, he never suspected it might be an illusion. Yet, all indicates that the apparition was a “dream,” in the same sense that the drops of ruby liquid had been a “dream.” As we have seen, the narrator tells us that the hair of the figure “streamed forth, into the rushing atmosphere of the room,” thereby implying that it was agitated by that “customary rushing of the wind” he had contrived (“Ligeia” 324, 330). This in turn suggests that the apparition had, like the other “wonders, also been prompted by a real external stimulus; that he was confusing the jetty-black arabesques of the curtain that covered the walls and furniture, and to which the artificial wind imparted a “hideous animation,” with Ligeia’s raven hair. Finally losing what little was left of his ability to separate dreams from reality, as Dickens’s madman would say, Poe’s narrator believed the illusion he had created.

The wind, incidentally, also explains, at least in part, the narrator’s impression that the apparition had a body. He “saw” the figure and apparently *knew* that it was advancing “bodily” and “palpably” before he ever touched it, which was the only way of being sure. However, as usual, the conjecture is apparently supported by a real perception. Three nights earlier, the narrator had felt, as he was himself passing through the middle of the apartment, a “palpable although invisible object”

rushing by him ("Ligeia" 325). When Ligeia appeared to him, it would appear, his overwrought imagination associated the two circumstances—after all, he only needed a little push to completely lose his precarious grasp on reality, and this might well have been it.

The artificial wind is also the key to understanding the nature of the connection "Ligeia" establishes with Dickens's "A Madman's Manuscript." I have already mentioned briefly this tale in the first chapter as one of the sources of "Ligeia," but this influence is more extensive than was previously indicated. Indeed, Mabbott called this tale one of "two obvious literary inspirations" of "Ligeia" ("Ligeia" 306). The resemblance between the two tales, however, is most intriguing. The story of the madman's wife, who was sacrificed to her family's financial interests through an arranged marriage with a wealthy madman, as Mabbott noticed, resembles that of Rowena. However, physically, the madman's wife is nothing like the blonde bride in Poe's tale—she looks, in fact, exactly like Ligeia. Or rather, the ghost of the murdered wife in Dickens's tale looks remarkably like the image of the enshrouded Ligeia in the end of Poe's tale. Mabbott even points out what he calls an "extreme parallelism" between the passages that describe the two apparitions (307). The madman imagines he sees, "standing still and motionless in one corner (...), a slight and wasted figure with long black hair, which streaming down her back, stirs with no earthly wind, and eyes that fix their gaze on me, and never wink or close" (Dickens, "A Madman's" 141). Although he does not remember "forms or faces," the madman, like Poe's narrator, recognises the apparition by the dark *hair* and *eyes* (141). And then, as the narrator of "Ligeia" concludes—or rather lets the reader conclude—from the "charnel character" of the "figure," that the "tenant of the tomb" had returned; so Dickens' madman knows that his dead wife "comes fresh from the grave," because it is "so very death-like" (141).<sup>75</sup>

Mabbott, however, did not find it suspicious in the least that the man who treated Rowena much like the "madman" did his wife should be visited by a female figure that looks almost exactly

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<sup>75</sup> There is an important difference. The narrator of "Ligeia" does not realise that the figure he describes could not have been "for many days, a tenant of the tomb" ("Ligeia" 328). I discuss the narrator's mistake more fully below.



like the latter's ghost. This parallelism suggests the apparition in "Ligeia" is, like her predecessor in Dickens's tale, an accusing ghost. The critic and editor of Poe's work, however, continued to regard the narrator of "Ligeia" as a sincere mourner, who just happened to marry a witch—an unconscious error that was the indirect cause of all *his* misfortunes. But then, he also overlooked the small detail that breaks what would otherwise have been a perfect parallelism: the wind. The hair of the ghost in "A Madman's Manuscript" stirred, as we have seen, "with no earthly wind." Underlying this statement is the suggestion of an inferential process. The narrator, it would appear, "saw" the hair move, but did not perceive any "earthly" draught. This intimates to the reader, as it appears to have intimated to the mad narrator, that the visitor was not of this world. A logical enough deduction under the circumstances.

In Rowena's room, however, the situation was very different. The wind that animated the black arabesques was certainly "earthly," although it might not have appeared so—that is precisely what defines a true phantasmagoric effect. This wind proceeds not from an open window, but from an unseen aperture, and this was the basis of the illusion. And then, of course, as I have pointed out, the decoration itself evoked Ligeia's hair. The "mourner" admits that when he first came to his abbey: "my labors and my orders had taken a coloring from my dreams;" yet, he claims "there was no system, no keeping" in the decoration of the bridal chamber "to take hold upon the memory" ("Ligeia" 320-21). He does not seem to realise why he had chosen that singular fabric for the curtains, but the reason appears obvious.

Evidently, prompted by an unconscious urge, he chose it so the black arabesques might be confused with Ligeia's hair. Had he been any less excited, he might have perceived that he had unconsciously created the illusion he experienced, superimposing the hair-like black arabesques on a golden background, and then animating the whole through the introduction of an all too earthly wind (it might be said that Poe had his narrator stage a phantasmagoric representation of the hallucination of William the femicide in Macnish's tale). In fact, just as the arabesques appear to

have been confused with Ligeia's hair, so Rowena's hair must, as it were, have vanished into the background. In this sense, the decoration foreshadowed the climax of the tale by optical illusion. In this sense, the "ghosts" in "Ligeia" and "A Madman's Manuscript" illustrate the distinction I have made between illusion and hallucination.

The direct inspiration for the flowing hair of the spectre of Ligeia—for there is, contrary to the narrator's suggestions, no reason to suppose that it was anything else—was evidently the ghost in Dickens's tale. However, Mabbott missed, in my opinion, the point of the parallelism. The mad narrator in Dickens's tale could not distinguish "dreams from realities," which the reader was led to infer was a consequence of his mental alienation, which in turn was caused by guilt. But the reader did not experience any such difficulty. The reader of *Ligeia*, however, must discover why the narrator is haunted by such visions—in his case, illusions. The parallelism between the tales, being the sign of a deeper kinship between the narrators of the two tales, is one of the clues to the mystery. They share similar visions because they have committed the same crime: both are femicides.

Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV, who in his 1973 article "Dickens and Poe" detailed the parallel between the two tales that Mabbott had first pointed out, also overlooked the hints of femicide, the decisive difference in the character of the "wind," and the all-important fact that the narrator had loved Ligeia *but* in death. Regarding the passage to which Mabbott alludes, he writes:

One might think that Dickens' and Poe's copy for the printer had gotten shuffled (...). In both works the men continue to be particularly affected by their wives' eyes, Dickens' narrator's reaction of hatred modified by Poe into irresistible and passionate love, certainly an improvement over Dickens' fairly flat statement of the matter. The effect of confused time is also more elaborate in Poe's handling, which is considerably longer than Dickens', thus intensifying the dreaminess. (14)

Like G. R. Thompson, whose *Poe's Fiction* also appeared in 1973, and Mabbott himself, Fisher is convinced that the reader of "Ligeia" is not supposed to be able to overcome the narrator's

confusion between dreams and realities, and that this was what particularly distinguished it from “A Madman’s MS.”

Although the apparition of Ligeia itself was clearly inspired, or perhaps more precisely designed to evoke the ghost in Dickens’s femicide story, the signs that precede this apparition in Poe’s tale, however, and which gave its narrator the impression that it was not a ghost, but a palpable “reality” are a clear parody of a burlesque episode involving a counterfeit ghost in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, in which the title character’s superstitious terror of being visited by the ghost of the first woman he murdered, Elvira, who he later finds was also his mother, is seemingly confirmed by the sound of a footstep, an unseen object passing by him, and the waving of a curtain: very nearly the same “signs” that gave to the narrator of “Ligeia” the impression that his entombed wife might be about.

In reality, the monk had adapted those signs, which had a natural cause, to his expectations, and is ultimately exposed to ridicule, when the supposed ghost is found to be in fact Flora, the maid, attired in a white sleeping-gown. The monk’s plight has other equally decisive similarities with that of Poe’s narrator, for this scene takes place while he waited for some drops of soporific he had poured into Elvira’s daughter, Antonia, to produce their effect.

In the first chapter of this dissertation I have already mentioned how Ambrosio raped and then murdered his sister Antonia in the tomb, according to a plan devised by the witch Matilda, among the mouldering corpses of deceased nuns, and how the scene bears a distinct resemblance with the final *tableau* in “Ligeia.” Sometime before this, Ambrosio had killed Antonia’s mother, Elvira, smothering her with a pillow, after she discovered his underhand attempts to seduce her daughter. Sometime after her burial, Antonia was in Elvira’s room, absorbed in mournful remembrance, when she was visited by her ghost, who prophesied she, Antonia, would die within three days. The shock occasioned by this terrible visitation plunged her into a life-threatening nervous illness from which she was still recovering when Ambrosio paid her a visit, under pretext of

inquiring after her health, and spiked her medicinal wine when no one was watching. After accomplishing his sinister purpose, the monk was ready to leave the premises but, having a reputation for exorcism, was asked, much to his chagrin, to spend the night in Elvira's room, where her ghost was said to have appeared.

At the time, of course, no one but Matilda and Ambrosio himself knew Elvira had been murdered. Yet, though safe from suspicion, his "enormous crime" had filled him with superstitious terror ever since he had committed it: "The murdered Elvira was continually before his eyes, and is guilt was already punished by the agonies of his conscience" (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 304). Here is, incidentally, another curious coincidence, for the narrator of "Ligeia" admits the mere mention of his first wife's name was enough to "bring before mine eyes in fancy the image of her who is no more" ("Ligeia" 311). Finding himself alone in the scene of his crime, the monk felt certain that his victim would appear to him too, "In spite of Matilda's assurances that the Spectre was a mere creation of fancy" (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 336).

At the same time, he could not stop thinking about the woman in the next room, his victim's daughter, and the "drops" he had put in her medicine. Now it occurred to him for the first time that his former lover Matilda, whom he had repulsed, could have betrayed him out of spite. He had been told that the soporific would induce terrible convulsions, and that these would be followed by apparent death, but all was quiet in the next room. He tranquillised himself with the thought "that the drops had not begun to operate," and resigned himself to the wait (336).

The monk was torn between fear and desire: "the chamber (...), the recollection which it brought with it of the murdered Elvira, and his incertitude respecting the nature of the drops given by him to Antonia, made him feel uneasy at the present situation" (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 336). In a frustrated attempt to beguile the wait, he opened a book, but "Antonia's image and that of the murdered Elvira persisted to force themselves before his imagination" (336). His attention was divided, therefore, between the image of the woman he had killed, and the image of the woman he

intended to rape upon revival, but whom he feared might not revive at all. I need hardly point out to the reader how closely his feelings match those of Poe's narrator: on the one hand, Rowena's room reminded him of the entombed, whose image was constantly before him, on the other, he was anxious about some drops, which resemble those in *The Monk* even in their ambiguity.

Ambrosio was still gazing uncomprehendingly at his book when two unexpected circumstances revived his terrors. First, "He fancied that he heard a foot-step" where "nobody was to be seen;" then, a "few minutes after the same sound was repeated, this time followed by a rustling noise close behind him" (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 337). This proved too suggestive. Ambrosio immediately associated these "signs" with his fears. Elvira, he thought, was coming. At this point, however, the monk hears a groan in the next room, and his attention is shifted to his other concerns. He surmised "that the drops" had finally "began to take effect" (337). By yet another wonderful coincidence, Poe's narrator is also convinced that *his* drops began to take effect after he heard a "footstep" and felt something rushing by him: "immediately subsequent to the fall of the ruby-drops," which he either saw or dreamed, "a rapid change for the worse took place in the disorder of my wife" ("Ligeia" 326). Yes, he is certain of the change, though he exaggerates its "rapidity." It took Rowena three days to die. Antonia, on the other hand, *apparently* died about an hour after the effects of what must have been a particularly powerful Mickey Finn first manifested themselves.

Meanwhile, back in *Elvira's* room, the monk's anxiety mounted. Completely unhinged, he started talking to himself:

"That Bed," said He in a low voice, "That Bed was Elvira's! There has she past many a quiet night, for She was good and innocent. How sound must have been her sleep! And yet now She sleeps sounder! Does She indeed sleep? Oh! God grant, that She may! What if She rose from her Grave at this sad and silent hour? What if She broke the bonds of the Tomb, and glided angrily before my blasted eyes? Oh! I never could support the sight! Again to see her form distorted by dying agonies, her blood-

swollen veins, her livid countenance, her eyes bursting from their sockets with pain! To hear her speak of future punishment, menace me with Heaven's vengeance, tax me with the crimes I have committed, with those I am going to commit . . . . Great God! What is that?" (337-38)

The picture conjured by the monk is very vivid. He imagines Elvira rising from her grave and seems about ready to project this image on his surroundings. Another suggestive circumstance almost pushes him over the edge of sanity: "His eyes were fixed upon the Bed" when "he saw the curtain shaken gently backwards and forwards (...). The Apparition was recalled to his mind, and He almost fancied that He beheld Elvira's visionary form reclining upon the Bed" (338). Still, he knew the image was not real. "'It was only the wind,' said He, recovering himself" (337).

But somehow, he could not *all* believe it was an illusion. After a while he finally nerved himself up to inspect the bed. As he approached,

a Figure drest in white started from the Alcove, and gliding by him made with precipitation towards the closet. Madness and despair now supplied the Monk with that courage, of which He had till then been destitute. He (...) pursued the Apparition, and attempted to grasp it.

'Ghost, or Devil, I hold you!' He exclaimed, and seized the Spectre by the arm.

'Oh! Christ Jesus!' cried a shrill voice; 'Holy Father, how you gripe me! I protest that I mean no harm!'

This address, as well as the arm which He held, convinced the Abbot that the supposed Ghost was substantial flesh and blood. (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 338)

With this inglorious catastrophe, the monk's ordeal resolves into a joke.<sup>76</sup> And another joke results from the comparison of this scene with the episodes of the "ruby-drops" and the apparition

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76 He was comprehensibly "Incensed at having been betrayed by this trifling cause into fears so ridiculous" (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 338-339).

of Ligeia in Poe's tale. Overall, the contrast with *The Monk* highlights how absurd and unjustified Poe's narrator's conclusions are. The monk heard a step; felt something rushing past him; saw the curtain of the bed move. He thought Elvira had come to punish him. And from the look of it, she had returned under the form of some weird manifestation that hovered weirdly between spirit and matter, which led him to conclude that he was not dealing with a mere ghost, but that his victim had actually "broke the bonds of the Tomb."

At first Ambrosio tried to convince himself that it was only the wind, before he grasped, quite literally, the real solution. Ironically, the monk's initial hypothesis would have made perfect sense in Rowena's room, which was alive with mysterious draughts. Indeed, this explanation perfectly fits the facts reported by the narrator of "Ligeia," who nevertheless appears to have decided *his* apparition was palpable before he ever touched it.

Equally telling are the diverging outcomes of these parallel stories. The monk earnestly wished the entombed Elvira would never wake up, but ardently desired that the body of the ailing woman in the next room, who had taken the drops of soporific, would wake from a death-like sleep in her tomb, so he could rape her. As the reader knows, his fears on both scores proved unfounded. In "Ligeia," however, the exact opposite *apparently* happens: her husband believes that Ligeia broke "the bonds of the tomb," to his unutterable horror, but Rowena never actually rose from her bed, as the narrator, who believed she had taken the drops, at first thought she might. The conclusion is inevitable. The drops and the returned Ligeia were made of the same stuff: the stuff dreams are made of. This particular illusion, however, was not prompted by desire, but by guilt.

And here is another irony. Although the drops could not have been there, imaginary poison may have been the real cause of Rowena's death. Basler, as we have seen, was convinced that the drops had been adapted "into the pattern of hallucination," but, in order to do this, the narrator would have had to distort many other details, for, according to his account, he could not possibly have dropped the fluid himself. We know this because Rowena refused to drink the wine her

husband “held to the lips of the fainting lady;” “she took the vessel herself,” he admits, “while I sat on an ottoman near me, with my eyes fastened upon her person” (Poe, “Ligeia” 325). It would appear that Rowena was so mortally afraid of her husband that she would not drink until he was sitting away from her. Still, had the drops really issued, as he claimed, from an “invisible spring in the atmosphere of the room,” Rowena, who was still alert enough to fear him, would certainly have seen them, but this was not the case: “If this I saw—not so Rowena” (325). Rowena’s terror of her husband might well have suggested to her that she was being poisoned, and her refusal to drink from his hands suggests the idea had indeed crossed her mind. Considering she had been trusted to the care of a man who hated her, and was glad to show it, this would have seemed plausible to her. She could, then, like her husband, have adapted her own illusions to her expectations. Thus, although the evidence clearly indicates she was not actually poisoned, imaginary poison may well have been the proximate cause of her demise.

The circumstances that so disturbed the narrator, especially the drops of red liquid, should have indicated to him, of course, that his initial impression was correct, that is, that Rowena’s illness was the natural result of the “phantasmagoric effect” and of the terror he himself admittedly inspired in her. However, when he “saw” them, he allowed himself all the excuses he denies her, claiming he did not believe they were real *until* she died. “She swallowed the wine,” he grants, “unhesitatingly,” which she certainly would not have done had she seen those fabulous drops, “and I forbore to speak to her of a circumstance which must, after all, I considered, have been but the suggestion of a vivid imagination, rendered morbidly active by the terror of the lady, by the opium, and by the hour” (Poe, “Ligeia” 325).

The radical misogyny of the narrator is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the double standard he applies to female and male testimony under identical circumstances. He had told us that Rowena “dreaded the fierce moodiness of my temper,” and that this gave this sensitive man “rather pleasure than otherwise” (Poe, “Ligeia” 323). Yet, *her* more than reasonable terror excuses the man



who inspired it, but not the woman he tortures. Nothing but the preconceived idea of the extreme “sensibility” of women could, I think, justify the judgment of the narrator. But the ambiguous sentence in which the narrator reports his thoughts at the time is marked by that special kind of tragi-comical irony that so often turns the sayings of the femicide against the speaker. He mentions the “terror of the lady.” The question is, which lady. He evidently meant the terror experienced by Rowena—Rowena’s fear, that is, of her husband—but the phrase could as easily be read as a reference to *his* terror of the lady *Ligeia*. The climatic last paragraph of the tale exploits precisely this confusion, which is in fact one of the structural traits of the second part of his tale: “these might indeed be the fair cheeks of the living Lady of Tremaine,” the narrator thought, but the eyes were definitely those “of the lady—of the LADY LIGEIA!” (330).

His mixed feelings of desire for and terror of the lady Ligeia evidently determined the very specific way in which he reacted to the phantasmagoria, just as Rowena’s terror of him was the cause of the “nervous illness” to which she eventually succumbed. In view of this fact, the narrator’s silence is itself murderous. He assures the reader that “he wished to show her [Rowena] (what, let me confess it, I could not *all* believe) that those almost inarticulate breathings, and those very gentle variations of the figures upon the wall, [mentioned by her] were but the natural effects of that customary rushing of the wind” (Poe, “Ligeia” 324). He wished to show her this, but he decided not to, effectively encouraging Rowena to assign her perceptions to supernatural causes. Why? Because a “deadly pallor, over-spreading her face, had proved to me that my exertions to reassure her would be fruitless” (325). Three days later, however, her “deadly pallor” was not enough to convince him that she was past reanimation. Meanwhile, she lingered for three more days, during which her husband kept his silence. He never told her the figures *really* were moving, or that the wind *really* was rushing about. He just watched her die.

The very avowal that he too was seeing and hearing things that were not there might have persuaded Rowena that she was not going crazy, and allayed her nervous suffering. It might even

have saved her life. But we will never know. Deciding against reason she was nervous *for no reason*, her unloving husband decided not to tell her *they both* had reasons to be nervous. Instead, he gives her some more wine. Every decision he makes, indeed, betrays his secret desire to kill her, so he might indulge the secret taste for dead women he had imbibed during his struggle to “fathom” Ligeia. A taste which is manifested from the start in the perverse decoration of the chamber he prepared for his bride.

The narrator also claims that Rowena’s “illnesses” defied “alike the knowledge and the great exertions of his physicians” (Poe, “Ligeia” 324). This suggests that they were not told the secret of the decoration either, and also that they did not suspect him of being the chief cause of Rowena’s apprehensions. Again, the parallel with Dickens’ “A Madman’s Manuscript” is striking. Indeed, I have before stated that the wife of the “madman” was killed by the shock occasioned by surprising her husband as he was about to stab her, but that is not strictly true. Afterwards, the madman managed to mislead her doctors, and distort their diagnosis, thereby precluding her recovery. Therefore, her husband’s silence was what actually killed the “madman’s” wife:

Doctors were called in—great men who rolled up to my door in easy carriages, with fine horses and gaudy servants (...) One, the cleverest and most celebrated among them, took me aside, and bidding me prepare for the worst, told me—me, the madman!—that my wife was mad. (...) A few days after, they told me I must place her under some restraint: I must provide a keeper for her. *I!* I went into the open fields where no one could hear me, and laughed till the air resounded with my shouts! (Dickens, “Madman” 142)

Poe’s narrator obviously thinks he too is much cleverer than his wife’s physicians. This is indicated by his boast about “no little medical reading;” but even more clearly by his claim that “much even of incipient madness might have been discovered” in the decoration of the chamber (Poe, “Ligeia” 328, 320). The evidence that the narrator was mad was, therefore, plain, but

Rowena's doctors, overlooking the evidence afforded by the decoration of Rowena's room itself, instead concluded that she was the one going mad.

This mistake was, in both tales, clearly intended as a representation of the kind of patriarchal prejudice that made it possible, in those days, for abusive man to get rid of an inconvenient spouse by confining her to a madhouse on the slightest signs of "nervousness." This possibility was enacted in both Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mary: Or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) and Matthew Lewis's scandalous phantasmagoric monologue, *The Captive* (1802).<sup>77</sup> Both stories manifested an anxiety that was rooted on the perception that doctors were seldom inclined to inquire whether a female patient had reason to be nervous. In any event, the diagnosis of the doctors in "Ligeia" and "The Madman's MS." are evidently biased. On the one hand, they are blind to the obvious signs of madness on the part of the husband, and, on the other, they jump to the seemingly pre-established conclusion that the women in the tale are hysterical. This is explicit in Dickens's tale, and only implied in Poe's. The change Poe introduced to the pattern has the advantage of making the readers accomplices to the male complot against Rowena. Thus, when the murders are brought to light, the conventional interpretation is itself indirectly denounced as a manifestation of the same wide-spread prejudice that had allowed the plots of these mad narrators to succeed.

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<sup>77</sup> Lewis "monodrama," which proved too terrifying for the audience and was withdrawn after the first presentation in Covent Garden, bears some striking similarities with Rowena's story. The protagonist is a sane woman confined by her husband to a madhouse. The drama depicts her slow descent into madness. In a letter to his mother, Lewis gives an account of the matter: "The papers will have already informed you that the monodrama has failed. It proved much too terrible for representation, and two people went into hysterics during the performance, and two more after the curtain dropped. It was given out again with a mixture of applause and disapprobation; but I immediately withdrew the piece" (qtd. in Baron-Wilson, *Life and Correspondence of M. G. Lewis* 1:234).

#### 4 — Ligeia's Struggle

In the previous section I have argued that the murder of Rowena is acted out before our very eyes, and in that sense is an obvious crime. The murder of Ligeia, on the other hand, is only obliquely intimated, and, in that sense, may be regarded as a hidden crime. Yet, this crime is in fact not much less evident than the assassination of Rowena. Indeed, the conclusion that the narrator killed Ligeia flows inevitably from each and every one of his statements—it flows, that is, from the plot. Particularly, the idea that the narrator loved her *before* her death, very effectually suggested by the narrator's tone of "mournful and never-ending remembrance," as Kenneth Silverman famously put it in the title of his biography of Poe, is, in reality, contradicted explicitly by the text.<sup>78</sup> Again, Poe's buried allusions to another fundamental text of the Gothic tradition from which the femicide story developed makes this inevitable conclusion even more evident.

We have seen how Poe drew inspiration for the drops and the ghost of Ligeia from *The Monk* and "A Madman's Manuscript," respectively, but where did the narrator get these ideas? The answer to this had also been staring us in the face. He had committed a bizarre crime similar to that committed by Lewis's "hero," and then, with his first wife's money, proceeded to do to Rowena pretty much what Dickens's femicide had done to his wife. The drops and the image of the enshrouded Ligeia rising from her deathbed he projected into the phantasmagoria are, in fact, reminiscences of that first crime. They are also a perfect fit for the gaps the narrator leaves in his account of his first marriage.

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<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Silverman's *Edgar Allan Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (New York: Harper, 1991) reflects the common notion that Poe was as obsessed with dead women as the narrators of some of his tales.

But it takes some effort to recognise this. We must emancipate ourselves from the first impression we get from the narrator. He keeps wailing about how much he misses Ligeia right from the start. In fact, that is all he ever does. So, how could he possibly have killed her? At first sight the hypothesis seems preposterous. But the elegiacal tone of the tale is misleading. This tone makes the reader overlook the fact that the behavior of the narrator at the time of Ligeia's death is entirely inconsistent with affection. In fact, he did not treat her any better than he did Rowena. This, I insist, is not a guess, but a necessary inference from his own words, which the reader is lured into overlooking.

Let us, then, return to the narrator's notoriously vague account of the last days of Ligeia. For the narrator, the sexless intercourse with his wife was a promise of forbidden delights. The sexual innuendo is, in this case, reinforced by an obvious allusion to the double taboo in the biblical account of creation. Ligeia is cast as an Eve-like creature, tempting her partner simultaneously with her body and knowledge not meant for mortals. Yet, after several years of marriage, the promise remained unfulfilled: "How poignant, then, must have been the grief with which, after some years, I beheld my well-grounded expectations take wings to themselves and fly away!" (Poe, "Ligeia" 316).

These few sentences are full of ominous incongruities. He should have been grieved, and he supposes he must have been, but somehow he does not recall having felt regret when she passed away. In fact, it is as if he was speaking of someone else. And there is something else that does not quite add up. Since he speaks of losing Ligeia, even employing the term "grief," we naturally assume he is referring to his reaction to his first wife's death. He cannot remember his grief, but, naturally, we think nothing of it. Surely, a man who loved his wife as he appears to have loved the "entombed" could have blotted all memory of the trauma of losing her—such things happen. As he proceeds, however, we realise that she was still very much alive when he started "grieving:"

And now those eyes shone less and less frequently upon the pages over which I pored. Ligeia grew ill. The wild eyes blazed with a too—too glorious effulgence; the pale fingers became of the transparent waxen hue of the grave and the blue veins upon the lofty forehead swelled and sank impetuously with the tides of the most gentle emotion. I saw that she must die—and I struggled desperately in spirit with the grim Azrael. (Poe, "Ligeia" 316)

The narrator, then, regarded Ligeia's death as an accomplished fact before she actually died. It seems to me that this changes everything. One thing would be for him to be distracted by her death, but the narrator had evidently given up on Ligeia, which explains why he cannot recall any feelings of "grief." Indeed, he places the emphasis on *his* "well-grounded expectations;" on the loss of something which he felt he had a right to expect. When Ligeia became ill, he lost the hope of achieving that mysterious "goal" he glimpsed when she bent over him, and, therefore, she was lost to her husband. Indeed, he effectively conveys the impression that he regarded Ligeia as a means to an end; that her value to him was contingent on her usefulness and on her willingness to satisfy his desire. This, it must be granted, is a very unloving thought.

What immediately follows—we are still on the same paragraph—is that "struggle" between Ligeia and the "Shadow" about which I have written at some length in the final section of the first chapter of my dissertation. There, I argued that Ligeia's opponent, also known as the "great Shadow," was the narrator himself. But even in an ingenuous reading the narrator's responses are all wrong for a loving husband. This is why I say that the murder of Ligeia was, in a sense, very obvious from the start—as obvious as that shadow on the floor. While Ligeia was still struggling for her life, he wished she would get on with her dying. Indeed, he actually admits he "struggled" to make her see what he saw: that she would have to die. Of course, at first, the reader will naturally assume this is only a metaphor:

the struggles of the passionate wife were, to my astonishment, even more energetic than my own. I groaned in anguish at the pitiable spectacle. I would have soothed—I would have reasoned; but, in the intensity of her wild desire for life, —for life—*but* for life—solace and reason were alike the uttermost of folly. Yet, not until the last instance, amid the most convulsive writhings of her fierce spirit, was shaken the external placidity of her demeanor. Her voice grew more gentle—grew more low—yet I would not wish to dwell upon the wild meaning of the quietly uttered words. My brain reeled as I hearkened, entranced, to a melody more than mortal—to assumptions and aspirations which mortality had never before known.

(Poe, "Ligeia" 316)

Once we try to make sense of this passage, against the narrator's instructions, the truth imposes itself. The narrator did not regret Ligeia's death, which he regarded as inevitable. He only regretted that she could not see things his way. Indeed, he makes it very clear that he and his wife were in fundamental disagreement. She wanted to live, but he wanted her to die. More precisely, he wanted her to *consent* to die; to abandon herself to the "shadow." He was "struggling," that is, to keep her from "struggling." As I said, we assume this to be a metaphorical "struggle." Still, if he did not "sooth" nor "reason" with Ligeia, exactly how, may we ask, did he "struggle" against her will to keep on living? All this suggests, of course, that the struggle was not metaphorical.

The evident parallel with Poe's earlier tale, "Morella," is enlightening. The narrator of that tale also felt a reversal of his feelings towards his wife. Indeed, Morella underwent a change very similar to that described by the narrator of "Ligeia:" the "blue veins upon" Morella's "pale forehead became prominent," and when he looked into her eyes, he too felt "dizzy;" however, unlike his successor, this narrator openly acknowledges that he "longed with an earnest and consuming desire for the moment of Morella's decease" (Poe, "Morella" 227). In "Ligeia" the narrator evidently

experienced the same feeling. He too felt a sort of dizziness when he gazed into his wife's eyes, and, albeit in a more oblique way, he also expresses a desire for her speedy demise.

Another decisive clue is the narrator's refusal to "dwell" on the "meaning" of the words pronounced by Ligeia when this mysterious "struggle" took place. It appears to me that Susan Amper was the first to grasp the significance of this fact, which even Koster and Matheson had overlooked. The latter, she writes:

omits what is perhaps the most compelling evidence: Ligeia's own realization that her husband was killing her. Describing her surprising fight for life, the narrator says he 'would not wish to dwell on the wild meaning' of the words she directs at him. What does he wish to avoid, unless it is the accusation that he is poisoning her? Were she voicing merely the dream of revivification, as he would like us to infer, he would not hesitate to dwell on it. It is his favorite topic. ("Masters of Deceit" 130)

According to Amper, Ligeia was actually threatening her husband, in a first unsuccessful attempt to save herself. This appears to me indisputable. However, there are some minor points on which I differ from her interpretation. Most of all, it appears to me that there is overwhelming evidence to the effect that an actual struggle occurred. Indeed, the ruby-drops—though, for reasons I have explained earlier, I believe these were not exactly poison—are probably the cause of Ligeia's "illness"—which, incidentally, the narrator never refers to by that word, just as he never refers to the drops as "poison"—, but not of her actual death. Besides, from the perpetrator's point of view, stealth is the great advantage of poison. It is an insidious weapon. Its administration can be disguised, and there is a lapse between it and the death of the victim. Thus, the victim may never realise the plot against his or her life. This, then, is the great advantage poison has over other murder weapons. It would seem, then, that Ligeia was responding to a more immediate, physical threat.



The narrator's feelings at the time, I insist, are another decisive clue. Not only did he not regret the death of Ligeia, he talks obscurely of sublime "assumptions and aspirations" that made his "brain reel" while he witnessed her "struggle" for life, which he regarded at the time as futile. This language suggests euphoria. According to the official interpretation, of course, the narrator felt elated because he obscurely intuited Ligeia's resurrection, hence the reference to a "melody more than mortal." Only a few lines later, in reporting his feelings when Ligeia finally died, the narrator shows us that his euphoria at her impending death may have had a far more prosaic explanation than he had earlier intimated: "She died; —and I, crushed into the very dust with sorrow, could no longer endure the lonely desolation in the dim and decaying [and never named] city by the Rhine. I had no lack of what the world calls wealth. Ligeia had brought me far more, very far more than ordinarily falls to the lot of mortals." (Poe, "Ligeia" 320 emphasis mine)

This is a remarkably unfeeling, even indecorous remark. He rushes over his sorrow as a matter of course, and in the next breath—metaphorically speaking—mentions her money. Moreover, the phrase I underlined is reminiscent of his earlier phrase "aspirations which mortality had never before known." This reveals us that he had had a financial motive for murder. She was, he only now tells us, fabulously rich—the verbal echo suggests that this is what made his "brain reel." Incidentally, in these few pregnant sentences, the narrator also informs us that he hastily left the country immediately after his wife died. This too is suspicious.

With Ligeia dead and he safely retired to the English countryside—he had lived with her in a "dim and decaying city by the Rhine"—he was free to spend her immense fortune as he pleased (Poe, "Ligeia" 320). This he proceeded to do with the utmost expediency, his "sorrow" notwithstanding. In fact, Ligeia's "removal" provided him with the means to realise a childhood dream: he decorated the abbey he acquired with the money she left him in a style "for which, even in childhood, I had imbibed a taste" (320). Now the wilful wife, which we may presume had hitherto objected to his squandering her money on his morbid fantasies, could no longer thwart his

plans. But he had other motives for murder, for Ligeia's death afforded him a more immediate satisfaction.

"In death," at last, Ligeia behaved like the "passionate wife" he had always wanted. In fact, she appears to have told him then all that he had been longing to hear:

That she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion. But in death only was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection. For long hours, detaining my hand, would she pour out before me the overflowing of a heart whose more than passionate devotion amounted to idolatry. How had I deserved to be so blessed by such confessions? — how had I deserved to be so cursed with the removal of my beloved in the hour of her making them? But upon this subject I cannot bear to dilate. Let me say only, that in Ligeia's more than womanly abandonment to a love, alas! all unmerited, all unworthily bestowed, I at length recognized the principle of her longing with so wildly earnest a desire for the life which was now fleeing so rapidly away. It is this wild longing—it is this eager vehemence of desire for life—*but* for life—that I have no power to portray—no utterance capable of expressing.

(Poe, "Ligeia" 317-18)

He "should not have doubted" that Ligeia loved him, but he did. In life, she had never displayed that "ordinary passion" which he construes, by implication, as "womanly." He obviously means sexual submission. But he guesses he had made a wrong judgment about her. With the benefit of hindsight, he recognises he should have known that "in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion." Which means, of course, that he did not know this. Thus, in his characteristic roundabout way, he informs us that he had expected some "ordinary" loving from her. In fact, that is at least in part what he meant by "well-grounded expectations." After all, they *were* married. Not surprisingly, however, Ligeia did not comply to his wishes. He insists she had a will of

her own. However, he contends that “in death” Ligeia more than made up for his disappointment by displaying an intense love such as he had never even dreamed was possible. We assume he is speaking of spiritual love, but the sexual undertones I have mentioned in the opening section of this chapter (see p. 266), as well as the numerous intimations of necrophilia in the tale labour against this interpretation.

The impression of Ligeia’s ethereality itself largely depends on the confused chronology of the narrator’s disingenuous account of her last days. But the timeline can be reconstituted and is, as everything else the narrator tells us, consistent with femicide and with nothing else I can think of. Why, the narrator wonders, had Ligeia been taken away from him precisely when she finally proved her love for him, and made up for all the disappointment he had felt in her. “*How*” had he “deserved” to be so “blessed” and so “cursed” *at the same time*? As usual, the sentimental tone suggests that this is merely a rhetorical question, expressing the speaker’s outrage with a cruel fate. The chronology, however, is decisive, as is the narrator’s precise literal meaning. He here clearly suggests that he may have done *something* to “deserve” at once the declarations by which he felt so blessed, and the “removal” of the woman who made them. He does not tell us what it was that he did—but does he really have too?

He tells us Ligeia spent “long hours (...) detaining my hand.” This too, on a first reading, appears perfectly innocuous. The narrator appears to be saying that she was “holding” his hand because she loved him. The verb he uses to express the thought is, however, a little quaint. This quaintness would not mean much had our suspicious not been raised by all the other suspicious inconsistencies in his text. Though, as time goes on, we come to realise they are not really inconsistencies—on the contrary, they form a perfectly consistent picture of a femicide.

We must not forget that the narrator himself has just slyly intimated he may have caused Ligeia’s death. He certainly did *much* to “deserve,” as he puts it, the “removal” of his second wife. Overall, the thing appears obvious enough. Ligeia wanted to live; he wanted her to die. And all

indicates he did not limit himself to *wishing* her dead, but actually attempted against her life. Moreover, she appears to have known he was about to kill her. Is it any wonder, then, that she should tell him precisely what he wanted to hear? With Amper, I think: “When Ligeia’s threats fail to induce her husband to spare her, she tries cajoling instead. This is the import, not previously noted, of her surprising death-bed conversion from cold intellectual to ardent lover” (“Masters of Deceit” 131). Nothing else makes sense.

The widower’s own words—their actual, precise meaning—betrays him, as usual. Even while attempting to convince the reader that it was the other way around, he mentions her “desire” for “life” six times in the two consecutive, actually specifying, twice, that her “desire” was “*but* for life,” always with emphasis added. He could not make it any clearer what was uppermost in Ligeia’s thoughts. She wanted to keep on living, and that was all there was to it. Later, he convinced himself that she lived only for him, but his words actually emphasise how utterly unwarranted this interpretation is. My interpretation, in addition to making, I think, much better sense than his, is also compatible with the common modern sense of the verb “detain.” Ligeia was, it would appear, *staying* her husband’s murderous hand. Indeed, as we connect the dots, the impression that an actual fight between the narrator and Ligeia took place becomes increasingly obvious. This would explain everything.

Susan Amper notices that Koster and Matheson “accept her protestations as genuine and think the narrator does likewise;” they “believe that he now repents his decision to kill her, alas too late to save her,” but the

narrator’s words contradict such a construction. Her outpouring rings false to him: it is too exaggerated (“more than womanly”) and too “unmerited.” Worse, it is “unworthily bestowed.” This sneaky phrase does not, as it first seems, imply the “unworthiness” of the object of affection; instead it accuses the bestower—Ligeia—

of acting unworthily. At length the narrator sees what she is up to, identifying unambiguously her professed longing for him with her desire for life.

(Amper, “Masters of Deceit” 126).

It appears to me, however, that the “unworthiness” of the object and of the “bestower” are not necessarily incompatible ideas. On the contrary. As I see it, the passage clearly states that no one could love the narrator. The analogy with Rowena’s case, incidentally, is not irrelevant. She “dreaded the fierce moodiness of my temper,” her husband tells us, and therefore “loved me but little” (Poe, “Ligeia” 323). Ligeia seems to have had as little reason to love him.

Besides, as I have already indicated, it appears to me that Amper inverts the chronology: the narrator clearly indicates that at the time he correctly surmised Ligeia was only trying to save herself, and had never loved him. Later, he concluded he had been mistaken. She had loved him, although he did not deserve it. This, of course, exactly corresponds to the patriarchal ideal of self-sacrificing love that Bulwer-Lytton projected on Madeline Lester: the spiritual woman atoned for her fleshiness precisely by sacrificing herself for a man that did not deserve her love. In fact, it was implied that no man was worthy of the love of these ideal women. In fact, by placing Ligeia above the carnality associated with “normal” femaleness, the narrator rendered her a fitting object for his extreme sentimental conception of love. At the risk of stating the obvious, I must point out that this idealisation required her death. At first, then, her husband thought Ligeia’s resistance “pitiable.” “At length,” however, he saw—or perhaps dreamed that he saw—that she wanted to live not for her own sake, but for *his*, and was delighted.

Ligeia’s death is, indeed, the chief chronological reference in her story. According to her husband, she expressed her love for him only as she was about to die. At the same time, she expressed her desire for life, while “detaining” the hand of her husband, who admits he may have done something to deserve her death. Her declarations, the actual letter of which he refrains from transcribing, were therefore contemporaneous with the “struggle” he mentions, as was the

miraculous dilation of her eyes, that haunted him ever since he spent “the whole of a midsummer night” *struggling* to “fathom” them (Poe, “Ligeia” 323). Indeed, all these things are, as we shall presently see, strictly contemporaneous. When he wrote this, Poe probably had in mind the exploits of the first fictional femicide in the Gothic vein in American literature, Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* in the novel of the same name (1798), who not only strangles his wife, but, like our hero, “pities” her for resisting what he regarded as her unavoidable doom. In his confession, the uxoricide recalls that, as he was nerving himself to the deed, his wife Catharine “took my (...) hand between her’s, and pressing it to her heart, spoke with that voice which had ever swayed my will, and wafted away sorrow,” that is, like Ligeia, she “detained” his hand. But her efforts were wasted on the killer. *Wieland* had made up his mind: “Catharine! I pity the weakness of thy nature: I pity thee, but must not spare. Thy life is claimed from my hands: thou must die!” (Brown, *Wieland* 158-59).

Like our narrator, *Wieland* saw that his wife had to die. And she did die, but like Ligeia, not as quickly as her husband would have wanted her to: “My accursed hand was irresolute and tremulous. I meant thy death to be sudden, thy struggles to be brief. Alas! My heart was infirm; my resolves mutable. Thrice I slackened my grasp, and life kept its hold, though in the mist of pangs. Her eye-balls started from their sockets” (Brown, *Wieland* 159 emphasis mine). Finally, Catharine *Wieland* gave up the fight: “Haggard, and pale, and lifeless, at length thou ceasedst to contend with thy destiny” (159). Likewise, according to her husband, Ligeia initially resisted the “shadow,” but finally forfeited her life. Indeed, she made him read the poem she had written, otherwise known as “The Conqueror Worm,” *after* her struggle. When he finished his recitation, she repeated to him those haunting words he attributes to Glanvill. Finally, “as if exhausted with emotion, she suffered her white arms to fall, and returned solemnly to her bed of Death. As she breathed her last sighs, there came mingled with them a low murmur from her lips. I bent to them my ear, and distinguished, again, the concluding words in the passage in Glanvill” (Poe, “Ligeia” 329). Thus, we know exactly where the narrator was when she died.

But the eyes are the real key to Ligeia's mystery. As I mentioned above, the narrator developed a theory for Ligeia's extraordinary, "more than womanly" love:

An *intensity* in thought, action, or speech, was possibly, in her, a result, or at least an index, of that gigantic volition which, during our long intercourse, failed to give other and more immediate evidence of its existence. Of all the women whom I have ever known, she, the outwardly calm, the ever-placid Ligeia, was the most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion. And of such passion I could form no estimate, save by the miraculous expansion of those eyes which at once so delighted and appalled me—by the almost magical melody, modulation, distinctness and placidity of her very low voice—and by the fierce energy (rendered doubly effective by contrast with her manner of utterance) of the wild words which she habitually uttered. ("Ligeia" 315)

He maintains, then, that Ligeia was more passionate than any other woman he had ever known, only it did not show. Susan Amper remarks on the ominous ambiguity of this passage, the interpretation of which, like so much else in the tale, is reframed by our recognition of the narrator's true character: "A model of weasel wording is the statement that Ligeia was a 'prey' to stern passion. An idiomatic reading would suggest that she was unable to control her own passion, but the passion can more appropriately be identified as the narrator's. The veiled meaning of the sentence is that the narrator, *who has victimized many women*, preyed on the impassive Ligeia the most" ("Masters of Deceit" 129). Susan Amper is convinced that the narrator is a serial-killer. I personally feel that there is no conclusive textual evidence to suggest this. I agree that the phrase "more violently a prey" refers to the narrator's "passion," but, to my mind, it suggests that Ligeia alone suffered its "violence." This highlights the contrast with Rowena, who *did not* suffer physical violence at the hands of the narrator. Therefore, in my interpretation, the phrase signals that Ligeia

had actually been strangled, a suggestion which is then reinforced by internal evidence as well as the buried allusion to *Wieland*.

Accordingly, my solution to the mystery of Ligeia's eyes also differs slightly from that offered by Amper: "The primary index of the 'passion' he seeks to arouse is her eyes, which during an assault would naturally dilate from fear, and which become the narrator's obsession. Revisiting his ecstatic description of Ligeia's eyes we discover an unmistakable sexual context" ("Masters of Deceit" 129). Indeed, this "stern passion" of which the narrator speaks is being contradistinguished from common passion—it appears here as a substitute of the passion he demanded from his wife, but which she never manifested. Once more, the narrator of Ligeia makes it very clear that the couple had no active sex-life, and also that he was not satisfied with this state of affairs.

I agree with Amper that the "dilation" of the eyes can only have occurred when the narrator assaulted her—which, incidentally, is not consistent with her claim that poison had killed her—but I think it was not the result of fear. Again, I believe the key is in the chronology. The only indexes of Ligeia's "stern passion"—for it must be noted that the phrase ostensibly refers to her—were the wonderful dilation of her eyes and a concomitant change in her tone of voice. But even this was not always noticeable. In fact, the "miraculous expansion" of the pupils, as the narrator puts it, in which he claims to have surprised the essence of her character, was noticed by him on very select occasions. In all rigor, he witnessed her excitement only *once* during all the time they spent together:

For eyes we have no models in the remotely antique. It might have been, too, that in these eyes of my beloved lay the secret to which Lord Verulam alludes. They were, I must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race. They were even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad. Yet, it was only at intervals—in moments of intense excitement—that this peculiarity became more than slightly noticeable in Ligeia. And at such moment was her beauty—in my



heated fancy thus it appeared perhaps—the beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth—the beauty of the fabulous Houri of the Turk. (Poe, "Ligeia" 312-13)

As usual, the narrator transforms Ligeia's portrait in a problem in metaphysics, and throws some learned allusions to round things up. Thus, Poe slyly lures the reader away from literal readings. The passage, however, contains many details that are crucial to the establishment of the chronology of the events in the story. In Ligeia's eyes, then, lay the secret of the phantom that haunted the narrator. That is, in the expression of her eyes "in moments of intense excitement." And when did Ligeia ever get excited? He could not be any clearer on that point. Not until her last hour was "the external placidity of her demeanor" shaken. This avowal, however, comes later in the tale, much too late for recognition, in a passage I have transcribed earlier in this chapter. By that time, the reader is already too busy trying to get at the symbolical meaning of those eyes, and will not be bothered with details.

And yet, the conclusion is unavoidable. Only "in death," during her struggles with the "Shadow," could the narrator have noticed what he calls the "miraculous expansion" of Ligeia's eyes, for that was the only time she ever got excited; and he could not have noticed it at all unless he was himself looking into her eyes as she was "struggling." Which, of course, was exactly what he was doing: for the night he "struggled" to "fathom" those eyes was the last night of her life. This leaves him in a very compromising position. Again, I believe he is being quite literal: he did actually "struggle" to "fathom" Ligeia. The dilation of the eyes itself suggests violence. Susan Amper, as we have seen, believes Ligeia was sexually assaulted, which is perfectly consistent with the evidence, but that this was not what killed her: "Observing first that the unusual largeness of her eyes became fully noticeable only 'in moments of intense excitement,' at which times he was himself in 'heated fancy,'" the narrator then proceeds to describe how he had "struggled" to "fathom" those eyes; "[r]epeatedly he believes he comes close to discovering in them the passion he craves, but always he falls back disappointed. This recurring pattern, sexually suggestive in itself,

finds its counterpart in the repeating episodes of revivification and relapse” (“Masters of Deceit” 129-30). Rape appears, indeed, the only viable solution to all these ominous hints. However, Amper did not realise, I think, that the same hints suggest that rape and death occurred simultaneously.

As the reader will recall, the supposed “relapses” of Rowena-Ligeia, which Amper identifies as a reenactment of the rape of the first wife, wore the aspect of a struggle with an “invisible” assailant. This suggests that the narrator was haunted by the look Ligeia had in her eyes when she died. And, of course, the narrator admits Ligeia satisfied him only *in death*. Thus, it would appear that she satisfied his desires *in death*. The narrator, however, seems to have taken great pains to obscure the connection between the expression and the special circumstances of its occurrence. The narrator simply does not want to talk about it.

There is another point on which the narrator “cannot bear to dilate,” and that is *how* could he have deserved death and love at the same time. By yet another suggestive choices of words, he once more draws attention to the very fact he intended to conceal: that he had done something that accounted at once for Ligeia’s unexpected, indeed incredible demonstrations of love, her death, *and* the miraculous *dilation* of her eyes. This chain of obscure connections is what leads me to conclude that this dilation was not caused by fear. Wieland had obtained precisely the same results by strangling his wife.

He too had been particularly impressed by the image of his wife’s eyes, which had started from their sockets when he tightened his grip around her throat. At first, after the deed was accomplished, the killer “gazed upon” the corpse of his wife “with delight;” but this feeling soon gave way to horror, as his glance once again fell on her distorted features, and particularly on her eyes: “These deadly and blood-suffused orbs but ill resemble the azure and exstatic tenderness of her eyes (...). Alas! (...) the gripe of the assassin had been here!” (Brown, *Wieland* 160).<sup>79</sup> This, I

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<sup>79</sup> “Orb” is a term also often applied in “Ligeia” to the title-character’s eyes: “The hue of the orbs was the most brilliant of black;” “I was possessed with a passion to discover. Those eyes! those large, those shining, those divine orbs!;” “her large and luminous orbs” (Poe, “Ligeia” 313-14).

Incidentally, it is also Matthew Lewis’ pet term for breasts. This rather unusual use of term (not recognised by the *OED*) is chosen presumably to suggest their fullness in some of the most lurid passages of *The Monk*, such as

think, is also the more than probable explanation for the expansion of Ligeia's eyes, and of the horror its recollection inspires in her husband.

I said before that the narrator of "Ligeia" will not tell us what he was doing while Ligeia was struggling for life, but that is not strictly true. After comparing her eyes with those of the Houri, he speaks at length of the time he spent examining them. He only neglects to mention that this had taken place in the night she died:

The hue of the orbs was the most brilliant of black, and, far over them, hung jetty lashes of great length. The brows, slightly irregular in outline, had the same tint. The 'strangeness,' however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the *expression*. Ah, word of no meaning! behind whose vast latitude of mere sound we intrench our ignorance of so much of the spiritual. The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How have I, through the whole of a midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! What was it—that something more profound than the well of Democritus—which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What was it? I was possessed with a passion to discover. (Poe, "Ligeia" 313)

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the scene in which Rosario reveals himself as the beautiful Matilda, threatening to commit suicide if he rejects her: "She lifted her arm, and made a motion as if to stab herself. The Friar's eyes followed with dread the course of the dagger. She had torn open her habit, and her bosom was half exposed. The weapon's point rested upon her left breast: And Oh! that was such a breast! The moon-beams darting full upon it, enabled the Monk to observe its dazzling whiteness. His eye dwelt with insatiable avidity upon the beauteous Orb" (*The Monk* 65). The "monkish" resonance of the term, infects the second quotation from Poe's tale in the previous paragraph, in which the narrator mentions his "passion to discover." Perhaps he would have liked to discover those other orbs that are not habitually exposed? I refer the reader to the previous section, where I argue that the same suggestion is contained in the passage where the narrator describes his ostensibly intellectual intercourse with Ligeia.

A well-known Gothic tale of which Poe would have been aware, Polidori's *Vampyre* (1819), was prefaced by "An Extract of a Letter to the Editor" which contained an anecdote in which breasts and eyes were also significantly coupled. In the famous night in which Byron, Shelley, and Mary Godwin—soon to become Shelley's wife—dared each other to write a supernatural thriller, Polidori asserts that Percy Shelley "suddenly started up and ran out of the room" (xv). Upon inquiry, Byron and "the physician," that is, Polidori himself, "found that his wild imagination having pictured to him the bosom of one of the ladies with eyes (which was reported of a lady in the neighbourhood where he lived) he was obliged to leave the room in order to destroy the impression" ("Extract of a Letter" xv). One cannot help but wonder if the lady in question was his future wife. Polidori's testimony is notoriously suspect, and, possibly slanderous. However, the interest of this episode for our purposes is quite independent of its testimonial value. I transcribe it for its suggestiveness which I feel Poe, if he ever came across it, must have appreciated.

The eye, however, is also associated *via* Glanvill to the vagina, a connection I discuss in the next chapter. The two, however, are not mutually exclusive. I believe Poe deliberately appealed to the intertext to draw attention to the sexuality his narrator attempts to suppress.

The “metaphysical” fireworks intimate spiritual love, but the chronology suggests otherwise. As Ligeia “struggled” for life, the narrator “struggled to fathom” her eyes. Although he appears honestly convinced that *within* those eyes lay some secret of cosmical and transcendental significance, he never strays much from the literal and exact truth. The “expression” in the eyes haunts him. Since this expression can be traced to Ligeia’s death, it becomes clear that Poe’s narrator was, like Wieland, haunted by the distorted features of his agonizing victim. Thus, the “struggle to fathom” Ligeia appears to have been both a rape, as the verb crudely intimates, and the cause of Ligeia’s death. In other words, death and the satisfaction of his wildest desires—again, this is what the narrator had been telling us all along—must have happened more or less at once, which would also explain why the recollection of the expression in the dying Ligeia’s eyes “at once appalled and delighted” him.

With this explanation, the symmetry between the two halves of the tale finally becomes intelligible. To the narrator, what he describes as a “drama of revivification” wore the aspect of a struggle between the dying Ligeia and an “invisible foe,” whose position he assumed, or resumed, in Rowena’s chamber (Poe, “Ligeia” 328-29). They were, of course, one and the same. The terse original account of the death of Ligeia, in the first versions of the tale, hinted the solution to the mystery even more plainly. “Methinks,” the mourner there wrote, “I again behold the terrific struggles of her lofty, her nearly idealized nature, with the might and the terror, and the majesty, of the great Shadow. But she perished. The giant *will* succumbed to a power more stern” (318n). In fact, this appears to me more than a hint: I believe it is the literal truth. While he writes, the narrator is haunted by the awful spectacle of Ligeia’s struggle with the “great Shadow.” His resentment is, incidentally, perfectly apparent here: the woman who dared have a will of her own was finally vanquished by that shadow in which his male pride is here but too clearly projected. Ironically, without his realising it, the same thing had happened to him in Rowena’s room. Ligeia’s struggle was *always* before him.

The signs of life supposedly on Rowena's corpse, therefore, are the signs of life the narrator had actually seen on Ligeia as he struggled with her. From this we may conclude, then, that the narrator repeatedly assaulted Ligeia, leaving her for dead several times. This in turn suggests that, like Wieland, he had "slackened his grasp" several times before accomplishing his design. At the end of this struggle, the narrator had indeed *seen* Ligeia rise from her bed, and advance "with feeble steps, with closed eyes, and with the manner of one bewildered in a dream" (Poe, "Ligeia" 329). I am convinced that, after reliving his struggle with Ligeia, he projected this image on the phantasmagoria, confusing it with reality.

Again, the parallel with the crypt scene in *The Monk* proves illuminating: "Gradually He felt the bosom which rested against his, glow with returning warmth. Her heart throbbed again; Her blood flowed swifter, and her lips moved. At length She opened her eyes, but still oppressed and bewildered by the effects of the strong opiate, She closed them again immediately" (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 380). Ligeia's "bewilderment" is consistent, indeed, with the supposition that she too—and not Rowena—had been given a "strong opiate," and prematurely prepared for the grave. The resemblance between the "apparition" of Ligeia and the revived Antonia furthers the suggestion. All this is entirely conjectural, of course—but so is the narrator's "thesis." My conjectures have the advantage of being by and large consistent with the narrator's meaning, which is more than can be said for what he lets the reader believe happened.

According to the narrator, his is the story of the sacrifice of Ligeia for her love for him, the implied moral of which perfectly corresponds to that of the archetypal male story, "Snow White," as stated by Gilbert and Gubar: the protagonist's "only deed (...) can be a deed of death, her only action the pernicious action of self-destruction" (*Madwoman* 42). Self-sacrifice, indeed, is the only course of action suitable for the ideal "spiritual" woman, as the narrator conceives her. "Ligeia," however, is structured in such a way that this idealization is systematically subverted. In this sense, the murder of Ligeia is not, properly speaking, a submerged meaning, as it corresponds to the

superficial, literal sense of everything the narrator says, for his discourse is actually perfectly coherent. However, the tendency of his rhetoric is to predispose the reader to disregard the violent femicidal implications of his text as unintended slips, or accidents of expression. In reality, however, upon analysis, we find that, in order to accommodate his “thesis,” we would have to disregard the actual meaning of every single line of his text—which, as we have seen, is precisely what most critics of Poe’s work have long been advising readers to do.

## 5 — The Secret of Ligeia's Eyes: Glanvill, Witches and Animal Magnetism

My statement of the metonymical association between the scrutiny of Ligeia's eyes and sexual penetration may appear a platitude. Indeed, I suppose that no one will deny that sex is implied in this matrimonial tale, but most modern critics thought that this meaning was *deeper* than I here imply. Most critics have regarded it, in practice, as a Freudian slip, that is, as a content that, despite being integral to the structure of the tale, was, as it were, far below the writer's consciousness. However, I believe the conscious effort on Poe's part to distance himself from his narrator is evident. This effort is a textual fact which must be addressed by any true psychoanalytical reading of "Ligeia," which would have to distinguish Poe's slips from those of his narrator.

Simply put, before we attribute a slip to Poe, we must first certify ourselves that it cannot be more convincingly traced to *the narrator's* inability to see things as they are. The shadow on the floor to which I keep returning misleads us into thinking that what happened to the narrator cannot be explained; however, the explanation of this phenomenon is so conspicuously obvious as to leave no doubt not only that the narrator made a mistake, but also that the mistake was planned by the author. Another double clue, working in a similarly deceptive way, indicates that Ligeia's eyes were indeed associated in the narrator's mind with sex, and also that he was unable to grasp this, just as he was unable to grasp the true meaning of the shadow. This clue is Joseph Glanvill (1636-1680), but not the passage the narrator *attributes* to Glanvill, and which was as mysterious to him as the eyes themselves. That too is a mistake, and a cover for the real allusion—just like the works Poe refers in the *Pinakidia* are distractions masquerading his real sources.

As we have seen, the narrator admits to having derived from "passages from books" the same mysterious feeling that he had got from Ligeia's eyes (Poe, "Ligeia" 314). He gives, however, only one example of this: the words Ligeia addressed to him right before she died, and which he

partly attributes to Glanvill. We have also seen in the previous section that the expression to which he refers was the look in Ligeia's eyes at the time of her death. Thus, Ligeia's eyes, her death, and the passage the narrator attributes to Glanvill are inexorably associated in his mind.

I say the narrator "attributes" the passage to Glanvill, because it could never be found, neither in his or anyone else's work. It did not appear "genuine" to Mabbott, who admitted "Poe may have made it up" (*Tales* 330n). But no one seems to have valued how vague the narrator's attribution of authorship is:

Among innumerable other instances, I well remember something in a volume of Joseph Glanvill, which (perhaps merely from its quaintness—who shall say?) never failed to inspire me with the sentiment. (...) Length of years, and subsequent reflection, have enabled me to trace, indeed, some remote connection between this passage in the English moralist and a portion of the character of Ligeia.

(Poe, "Ligeia" 314-15)

For a man with his pretensions to scholarship, the narrator is remarkably inexact. He remembers the words vividly, but he evidently cannot recall where in Glanvill's work they appeared. One gets the feeling the narrator is quoting from memory, trusting his intuition, which, as so often happens with Poe's characters, is flawless.

Indeed, there is *something* in a volume by Joseph Glanvill that could have inspired the strange feelings the narrator harbours for his first wife, and particularly for her eyes. In fact, the phrase the narrator had employed, in the previous paragraph, to express the unfathomable mystery of Ligeia's eyes, "something more profound than the well of Democritus" is doubtless an allusion to a passage in Glanvill's "Against Confidence in Philosophy and Matters of Speculation," included in *Essays on Several Important Subjects* (1676) Poe would later use as motto for "A Descent to the Maelstrom" (1841) (Poe, "Ligeia" 313). Thus, the narrator paraphrases Glanvill *without* mentioning his name in one paragraph, and in the next mentions his name in reference to a passage that he



probably *did not* write. The vagueness of the attribution makes this fact significant: it becomes a literary fact, which indicates Poe's intention of indicating to the reader that his narrator was confused, and also that he—Poe—had indeed made the passage up himself.

I will discuss the significance of this particular allusion later in this chapter (see section 10). I am convinced, however, that Poe intended to allude, through misquotation, not to a specific passage in Glanvill, but to a group of very peculiar ideas on the subject of witches entertained by that author. Indeed, the conclusion that Ligeia was a witch clearly flows from the narrator's thesis. Glanvill happened to be a firm believer in witches and a great supporter of witch-hunts. In a long essay, which appeared originally under the title *Some Philosophical Considerations Touching the Being of Witches and Witchcraft Written in a Letter to the Much Honour'd Robert Hunt, Esq.* in London in 1667, Glanvill maintained that *all* that was said of witches was true. In its original form, the essay was an open letter to Robert Hunt, a judge now mostly remembered for the witch trials to which he presided in the county of Somerset in the 1650s, which produced many convictions. Glanvill congratulates his friend for waging war against witchcraft, and urges him onward.<sup>80</sup> The essay later appeared, in a considerably revised form, in *Essays on Several Important Subjects* (1676), which is probably Glanvill's more well-known book, under the title "Against Modern Sadducism in the Matter of Witches and Apparitions." The essay is best known in the much enlarged edition prepared after Glanvill's death by his friend Henry More and first published in 1681 under the title *Saducismus Triumphatus: Or, Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions*. This book, which was reprinted at least twice in the following decades (in 1700 and

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80 I quote the text of the revised 1676 edition of Glanvill's essay, which, being the last published in the author's lifetime, may be regarded as the definitive version. In that version, however, the first paragraph of the text of the original published text of the letter was omitted: "Sir, The frequent and late dealings you have had in the Examination of Considerations on the Subject, which thought they are the careless and hasty product of a sitting or two, may yet, I hope affords you some not unreasonable accounts of the odd phenomena of Witchcraft and Fascination, and contribute to the Defence of the Truth and certainty of matters which you know by Experiments that could not deceive, in spite of the little exceptions of those that are resolved to believe nothing in affairs of this nature" (Glanvill, "Some Considerations" 1-2).

1726), became a fundamental text in the literature on the subject.<sup>81</sup> “Ligeia” contains strong evidence of Poe’s acquaintance with this text.

The narrator of Poe’s tale, then, was particularly fascinated with the eyes of Ligeia, whom he evidently believed was a witch. In “Against Modern Sadducism,” Glanvill advanced an entirely original theory of witchcraft, which included a startling new explanation for the witch’s reputed power of fascination. He conceived of witchcraft as a sexually transmissible infection. The sources agreed that the origin of the witch’s power was a pact with a malignant spirit, or “familiar,” who performed wonders at her bidding. Glanvill believed that these “familiar” spirits were “feculent and gross,” and “not perfectly abstract from all Body and Matter,” remarking that they had been known to become momentarily palpable on occasion (“Against Sadducism” 10). Thus, he admits not only the possibility, but the probability (which in his vocabulary means certainty) of “palpable Intercourses between the bad *Genii*, and Mankind” (23). Thus, the partial materialization of a

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81 Barbara Cantalupo was the first Poe scholar to intimate, albeit in very vague terms, a connection between Glanvill’s essay on witches and Poe’s “Ligeia:” “Although critics have not successfully attributed the quotation [used as a motto for the tale] to Glanvill, his *Saducismus Triumphatus*, first published in 1689 and revived in 1834 as a sixpenny pamphlet, *Plain Evidence of the Actual Evidence of Witches*, relates the testimonials of people purporting to have witnessed spiritual possessions, and his name would have been associated not only with occult practices but with the nature of doubt as well” (“Poe’s Visual Tricks” 58). The last part of the sentence echoes Stuart and Susan Levine’s remark, quoted in a footnote to Cantalupo’s text, that Glanvill was “best remembered,” among other things, “for his philosophical skepticism” (*Thirty-Two* 55n2). The latter probably had in mind Glanvill’s “Against Confidence in Philosophy,” the first in the 1676 anthology *Essays*.

Cantalupo’s account of the convoluted history of the publication of the essay and its several incarnations is inaccurate in several respects. As already mentioned, *Saducismus Triumphatus* is an expanded edition of the essay which was first published in 1667 under the title *Some Philosophical Considerations Touching the Being of Witches*. The essay was then reprinted on several occasions in Glanvill’s lifetime with different titles. The Library of the University of California Davis (digitised copy available at Hathi Trust) holds a copy of a volume published in London in the following year, 1668, entitled *A Blow at Modern Sadducism In Some Philosophical Considerations About Witchcraft (...) with Reflections on Drollery, and Atheisme* which is labelled “The Fourth Edition Corrected and Enlarged.” The first part of the book contains the original letter to judge Hunt. To this was added a second part, entitled *Palpable Evidence of Spirits and Witchcraft*, containing some accounts of supposed witchcraft (starting in page 113). Then, as I have already mentioned, the essay was republished in revised form in 1676.

*Saducismus Triumphatus*, then, is an enlarged edition of *A Blow at Modern Sadducism* with the addition of a “Letter of Dr. Henry More on the Same Subject,” prepared by the latter after Glanvill’s death in 1680. The first edition, however, appeared in 1681, and not in as 1689, as stated by Cantalupo. To further confuse the issue, the 1681 and 1700 editions spell the first word in the title with one “d,” whereas “sadducism” had been consistently written with two in previous editions of Glanvill’s essay. Moreover, the author’s last name is there spelled “Glanvil.” The 1726 edition of the book, however, restaures what appears to have been Glanvill’s spelling of the title. The 1834 pamphlet mentioned by Cantalupo is an abridged edition of the second part of *Saducismus*, and does not contain the text of Glanvill’s original essay on witches.

disembodied spirit that the narrator of “Ligeia” believes took place, despite being incompatible with conventional notions of pneumatology, was regarded by Glanvill as an indisputable fact.<sup>82</sup>

This is crucial for his theory, for he believed the original pact between a witch and the familiar spirit was sealed through sexual congress. This is mostly inferred from another supposed fact, to wit, that witches were “suck’d in a certain private place of their Bodies by a familiar” (5-6).<sup>83</sup> In view of this, it seems “probable” to Glanvill

that the Familiar doth not only suck the Witch, but in the Action infuseth some poisonous Ferment into Her, which gives her Imagination and Spirits a magical Tincture, whereby they become mischievously influential (...). And ‘tis very likely that this Ferment disposeth the Imagination of the Sorceress to cause the mentioned ἀφαρεσιὰ,<sup>84</sup> or separation of the Soul from the Body, and may perhaps keep the Body in fit temper for its reentry; as also it may facilitate transformation, which, it may be, could not be effected by ordinary and unassisted Imagination. (“Against Sadducism” 10)

Glanvill here alludes to three wonders reportedly performed by witches, which, incidentally, are also implied in “Ligeia:” resurrection, conceived as the ability of the spirit to leave the body and reenter it, shapeshifting, and the ability to colonise their victims minds’ with their imagination, that is, fascination. What makes Glanvill’s proposal absolutely original is his contention that all these phenomena may be traced to the effect of that elusive poisonous “ferment,” which foreshadows Mesmer’s inconceivably subtle “magnetic” fluid. This pseudo-physiological theory of fascination is particularly relevant for our purposes: “the influences of a Spirit possess’d of an active and enormous Imagination, may be malign and fatal where they cannot be resisted; especially when they

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82 Glanvill himself recognises that his “facts” clash with the conventional notion of a “spirit:” “if all those Relations were arbitrary Compositions [i.e., if the accounts of cases of witchcraft were fictional], doubtless the first Romancers would have framed them more agreeable to the common Doctrine of Spirits” (“Against Modern Sadducism” 6).

83 Another formulation of the same idea appears later in the text: “the Devil’s sucking the Sorceress is no great wonder, nor difficult to account for” (Glanvill, “Against Modern Sadducism” 10).

84 The word, which is not found in Liddell and Scott’s *A Greek-English Lexicon* (1940), may be a typographical error for ἀφαρεσις, εως, ἡ.

are accompanied by those poisonous Reaks that the Evil Spirit breathes into the Sorceress, which likely are shot out, and applyed by a Fancy heightned and prepared by Melancholy and Discontent” (“Against Sadducism” 19). According to Glanvill, the seats of this this power of fascination were the “Eyes and” the “Imaginations [sic]<sup>85</sup> by which for the most part she acts upon tender bodies” (14). By “she,” Glanvill means the witch. Thus, he believed that “the Pestilential Spirits” were “darted by a spightful and vigorous Imagination from the Eye, and meeting with those that are weak an passive, in the Bodies which they enter, will not fail to inject them with a noxious Quality, that makes dangerous and strange Alterations in the Person invaded by this poisonous influence” (14).

Glanvill thought that women alone were equipped to establish the sexual contact with an evil spirit from which he supposed witches derived their power. Indeed, he thought that witches were necessarily female, as is indicated by his applying the pronouns “she” and “her” to the “witch” in the passage detailing that transaction I have quoted above, and also by his frequent use of the term “sorceress” as a synonym for “witch.” Although he is too prudish to name the “private part” in question, Glanvill evidently means the vagina.

Notwithstanding, although they could not establish the original sexual contact with an evil spirit, men were exposed to a sort of secondary infection by the nefarious “ferment” if they established eye contact with a witch. The narrator of “Ligeia,” of course, had spent long hours gazing into Ligeia’s eye; he also sensed some connection between her eyes and Glanvill, but could never exactly define the nature of that connection. If only the narrator could remember his Glanvill, he would have known how dangerous it was to look a woman, especially one such as Ligeia, in the eye! It appears to me that the “ferment” is that elusive something the narrator felt was *deep inside* Ligeia’s eye, but could never quite define. By the same token, this theory is evidently that “something” in “a volume” of Glanvill that inspired the feeling the narrator had about the eyes.

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85 The plural is probably not a mistake. Glanvill sometimes uses the term “imagination” in the unusual sense of imaginary form or idea.

Naturally, since he could never accurately recall what he had read, he could never get at the bottom of the matter.

Indeed, Glanvill articulates the vague feelings the narrator projects on his wife's story, notably by postulating a concrete, physical association between eyes and vaginas and, by extension, sexual intercourse. This constitutes, I think, the best indication that Poe intended to allude specifically to the most peculiar notions Glanvill entertained on the subject of witches. Indeed, all the aspects of the official story of "Ligeia," including those that appeared strange to Philip Pendleton Cooke, are compatible with Glanvill's theory. The narrator of the tale clearly suggests, for example, that he unwittingly summoned his dead wife: "I would call aloud upon her name, during the silence of the night, or among the sheltered recesses of the glens by day, as if, through the eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardor of my longing for the departed, I could restore her to the pathway she had abandoned—ah, *could* it be forever?—upon the earth" (Poe, "Ligeia" 323). For Glanvill this too was perfectly probable, for familiar spirits come in two major varieties. They may be demons, but "are sometimes wicked Spirits of our own Kind and Nature," that is, spirits of the dead, "and possibly the same that have been Sorceress and Witches in this Life" ("Against Sadducism" 12).

Glanvill also believed that witches had the ability to send their spirits from their bodies, but also, by virtue of the all-powerful mysterious fluid, of maintaining the latter "fit" to receive the former, upon its return. Most particularly, he thought that the imagination of witches could perform, again, by virtue of his diabolical "ferment," "alterations" in their own bodies or those of others. All this is clearly implied in the passage I transcribed earlier about the "ferment," which was characterised by a certain hesitation regarding the nature of the changes thus operated. This is, in fact, one of the most singular and intriguing aspects of his theory: "an heightened and obstinate Fancy [fancy and imagination are convertible terms in Glanvill] hath a great influence upon impressive Spirits, yea (...) on the more passive and susceptible Bodies" ("Against Sadducism" 19).

Therefore, he thought, the wonders witches were able to perform, and particularly the “alterations” he mentions, could be either illusory or real—it was impossible to decide: “’tis easie to apprehend, that the Power of Imagination may form these passive and pliable Vehicles [Glanvill means bodies], into those shapes,” the witch imagines; or, “perhaps sometimes the confederate Spirit puts tricks upon the Senses of the Spectators, and those shapes are only Illusions” (9).

This is, of course, the same kind of hesitation that permeates “Ligeia,” and which Thompson thought could not be overcome. What seems to me most significant, is that, according to Glanvill’s system of thought, the mere possibility of a wonder being an illusion is not enough to exclude real magic. The observer may or may not have been deceived; that is of no practical difference to him. Whether real or imaginary, Glanvill would ascribe miraculous transformations and resuscitations such as the narrator of “Ligeia” reports to the *witch*’s overdeveloped imagination, and never to the unassisted imagination of the potential dupe of the illusion.

Let us apply the theory to the evidence reported by the narrator of “Ligeia.” According to this authority of witchcraft, to which the narrator happens to allude, the change in personal appearance in the body of Rowena does not exclude the hypothesis of possession by the spirit of the dead Ligeia, as Cooke supposed, because the spirit of dead witches, as we have seen, may be summoned and act as a familiar, therefore, theoretically, it may possess a “passive” body, changing its shape. These things, Glanvill says, are all very likely. But then, the transformation could also be an illusion *wrought* by the spirit of the dead witch, especially if the beholder had been infected by the noxious “ferment”—for, and this is another of Glanvill’s peculiar notions, there is no such thing as a spontaneous illusion.

Indeed, Glanvill is sometimes credited with being a precursor of modern scientific thought. This is a very unfair assessment of his work, which constitutes rather an explicit inducement, precisely, to the kind of *absolute* credulity in matters of fact that the narrator of “Ligeia” displays. In reality, it is no exaggeration to say that Glanvill’s essay is a defense of superstition. To those who

objected that the wonders attributed to witchcraft were impossible, the author replied that the “suppos’d Impossibility of these Performances, seems to me a probable Argument that they are not wilful, and designed Forgeries” (“Against Sadducism” 6). The fallacious reasoning behind this may be summarised as follows. An impostor, by definition, wants to pass as historical truth something that never took place. Since any spinner of yarns *could* come up with something more probable than the *incredible* performances attributed to witches, Glanvill concludes that such impostors *would* necessarily come up with something more probable. Glanvill thought, in other words, that the improbability of such a report being false was always greater than that of the miracle itself—in fact, he regarded a false improbable report as a practical impossibility. No *impostor* would make up such a story, because it would never be believed, therefore, all supernatural, *seemingly* impossible stories were necessarily true. Of course, Glanvill defeats his own argument by proving that a story needs not be *probable* to be believed.

But must we credit *all* that was said about witches? Are we not permitted to doubt at least *some* of the reports? Not according to Glanvill: “to deny evidence of Fact, because their Imagination may deceive the Relators, when he hath no reason to think so, but a bare presumption, *that there is no such thing as is related*, is quite to destroy the Credit of all Humane Testimony, and to make all Men liars” (“Against Sadducism” 17). This argument tends to the paradoxical conclusion that reports of seemingly possible things alone are suspect. Any bare relation of “facts,” say, like those that the narrator of our tale believes have taken place at Rowena’s wake, by their very impossibility, should be worthy of implicit credit. Since no one would believe such an incredible story, no one would have invented it, therefore, it must be true. Glanvill erases a third possibility: that of the witness being the dupe of an illusion. Surely, to be “deceived” is not the same thing as being a “liar.”

Overall, Glanvill topsy-turvy empiricism, inasmuch as it rejects any system of negotiation between doubt and belief, illustrates the meaning of the word preposterous. Indeed, though he

affects to proceed rationally from “facts” to theory, he effectively seals his own argument, and the testimony on which it is based, against the possibility of any test of fact. In the context of Poe’s work, his approach is significant for being the exact opposite of Dupin’s. The detective, faced with the seemingly impossible, started by excluding absolute impossibilities; Glanvill, on the other hand, accepted everything that appeared impossible. Consequently, not to make liars of all men, he made presumptive witches of all women.

This was a matter of faith to Glanvill. The duty of the pious “philosopher” was to prevent any doubt from creeping into the minds of the faithful by whatever means possible. If the public consented to believe *everything*, all would be well; if, however, the tiniest doubt were to get past his blockade, his fragile Faith would surely be defeated, and society would slide into atheism:

When Men are arrived to this degree of Diffidence and Infidelity [that is, when they no longer believe in witches], we are beholden to them if they believe either Angel, or Spirit, Resurrection of the Body, or Immortality of Souls. These things hang together in a Chain of *Connexion*, at least in these Mens [sic] *Hypothesis*, and ‘tis but an happy chance, if he that hath lost one Link, holds another.

(“Against Sadducism” 2)

Therefore, he felt it his duty to regard *all* the wonders of witchcraft as “infinitely confirmed” facts, and thought that to doubt them, or any report of supposedly supernatural phenomena, was tantamount to irreligion—this is the “sadducism” mentioned in the title of his book (Glanvill, “Against Sadducism” 38).<sup>86</sup> The inevitable consequence of this Inquisition-like reasoning, of course, was that *all* those accused of witchcraft were guilty, and deserving of punishment. Glanvill’s

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86 The passage is worth transcribing in its entirety. Glanvill contends the Scot’s *Discovery*, a book which argues against the belief Glanvill tries to defend, is worthless, because the “Author doth little but tell odd Tales, and Silly Legends, which he confutes and laughs at, and pretends this to be a Confutation of the Being of Witches and Apparitions” (“Against Modern Sadducism” 38). Glanvill therefore concedes that Scot has, indeed, “confuted” some reports, but that those reports were worthless themselves. True reports, he further implies, are impossible to “confute.” However, as I indicated before, Glanvill contradicts himself, for in his system no report can be dismissed, provided it appears impossible. In any case, Glanvill mostly calls Scot names: “His Reasonings are Trifling and Childish; and when He ventures at Philosophy, He is little better than absurd: So that I should wonder much if any but Boys and Buffons should imbibe Prejudices against a Belief so infinitely confirmed, from the loose and impotent Suggestions of so weak a Discourser” (38).



theory also reflected the most extreme prejudices against women. Indeed, Glanvill offered explicit encouragement to his friend Hunt to condemn witches, and his writings would later inspire other similar witch trials, such as those held in Salem. Inasmuch as these trials victimised mostly women, his superstition was femicidal not merely in spirit but in effect.<sup>87</sup>

It appears to me, then, that the significance of Poe's allusion to Glanvill—to the texts he actually wrote, as opposed to the passage he evidently did not—is that of making clear that the narrator of the tale had suffered the contagion of that writer's misogynous superstition—that is, that he had been the victim of a kind of influence which does not require a satanic ferment: suggestion. Ironically, this is a possibility not contemplated by Glanvill's theory. Even if the narrator could remember what he read, his works would not help him to separate dreams from reality. On the contrary, Glanvill's theory would have suggested to the narrator the very hesitation that permeates his narrative. Everything is possible. Ligeia may have broken the bonds of the tomb, or perhaps taken possession of the tenantless body of her successor, changing its shape, or it may have been an illusion. In any case, a reader impressed by Glanvill's suggestions would not doubt it was witchcraft.

Through his stealthy but pointed allusion, Poe indirectly suggests also that the spirit of gullibility and misogyny that had presided to the witch-hunts of the past had not been wholly eradicated in the supposedly enlightened nineteenth century. Those who refuse to think will always be the dupes of superstition, no matter how much “reading” they may boast of. Indeed, the question is not how much one has read, but how much one has profited from that reading. Once again, Poe drives home the point that, as Pope once said, “A little learning is a dangerous thing” (“Essay on Criticism” 63).

The buried allusion to Glanvill, aside from discrediting the narrator's pretensions to learning and scientificity, and upsetting the official supernatural theory, also contributes to show that sexual

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<sup>87</sup> For a detailed study of the Salem Witch trials see Elizabeth Reis's *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*.

motivations played an important role in his behavior. Indeed, the two most prominent traits of the narrator's style are a very obtrusive display of erudition denoting the pride of scholarship, and the implied rejection of sexual desire. By explicitly construing his relationship with his first wife as that of a pupil and master, and insisting that their intercourse consisted exclusively in the study of metaphysics, he encourages the reader to dismiss the erotic undertones of his description of Ligeia, of her struggle, and her supposed return to life. This impression, of course, is everywhere contradicted by submerged meanings and allusions.

As we have seen, the narrator claims that Ligeia's "passion" expressed itself not only through the "miraculous expansion of the eyes," but also "by the almost magical melody (...) of her very low voice" (Poe, "Ligeia" 315). We have already seen that the text forces us to conclude the "expression" to which the narrator refers is that exhibited by Ligeia at the time of her death. This is confirmed by his reference to her "very low voice," for, this too may be traced to her final hours. As she was fighting for her life: "Her voice grew more gentle—grew more low," the narrator admits, refusing, however, to discuss the "meaning" of the "wild words" she then pronounced, and which we must conclude are those very "words" he had mentioned earlier, when he discussed the expansion of her eyes (317). The allusion to Glanvill, reiterating the implied association between the eyes and sex, reinforces the suggestion that what the narrator describes as the "fathoming" of his first wife's eyes was, in fact, a sexual encounter.

This conversation held in very low tones, and involving close eye contact, constitutes, I think, another buried allusion to a source which reiterates the suggestion that sexual intimacy is the solution to the riddle. The bewilderment Poe's narrative induces in the reader exactly parallels Tristram Shandy's mock bafflement in Laurence Sterne's novel of the same name before "The Intricacies of Diego and Julia," an ostensibly inscrutable tale by the fictional Slawkenbergius.<sup>88</sup>

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88 In his introduction to "Lionizing," Mabbott considers that "Poe undoubtedly knew 'Slawkenbergius' Tale,' in *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne" (*Tales* 1:171).

Specifically, Shandy declares himself positively at a loss to understand what happened “when Fernandez left the courteous stranger and his sister Julia,” who were lovers, “alone in her chamber:”

Heavens! thou art a strange creature Slawkenbergius! (...) how this can ever be translated, and yet if this specimen of Slawkenbergius’s tales, and the exquisiteness of his moral, should please the world—translated shall a couple of volumes be.—Else, how this can ever be translated into good English, I have no sort of conception.—There seems in some passages to want a sixth sense to do it rightly.—What can he mean by the lambent pupilability of slow, low, dry, chat, five notes below the natural tone,—which you know, Madam [Shandy means the reader], is little more than a whisper? The moment I pronounced the words, I could perceive an attempt towards a vibration in the strings, about the region of the heart.—The brain made no acknowledgment.—There’s often no good understanding betwixt ‘em.—I felt as if I understood it.—I had no ideas.—The movement could not be without cause.—I’m lost. (Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* 274-75)

The word “pupilability” appears to be a whimsical invention. Apparently, it was formed from the adjective “pupillary,” which has reference to “pupil,” in the sense of student, which does not make much sense in the context. The narrator interprets the word as a punning allusion to the “pupil” of the eye. Shandy believes, then, like the narrator of “Ligeia,” there is some hidden meaning connected with the eyes and the *very low* voice in which the couple’s private interview was conducted; like him, he also “feels” he understands the mystery but declares that meaning cannot be plainly expressed.<sup>89</sup> The humor of the passage, however, depends on the obviousness of the mystery, which only the most ingenuous of readers could miss.

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89 This determines an additional layer of irony, for, of course, “pupilability” is itself the narrator’s translation of Slawkenbergius original Latin. The *OED*, which gives *Tristram Shandy* as the only occurrence of the word, conjectures the word was formed from the adjective “pupillary,” which refers exclusively to “pupil” in the sense of student, but acknowledges Sterne meant “a punning allusion to the pupils of the eyes.”

Indeed, in spite of his pretended inability to declare the hidden meaning, Shandy himself clarifies the sense of the supposedly untranslatable passage, and of the pun in particular, by an additional layer of ludicrously transparent sexual innuendo:

I can make nothing of it,—unless, may it please your worships, the voice, in that case being little more than a whisper, unavoidably forces the eyes to approach not only within six inches of each other—but to look into the pupils—is not that dangerous? —But it can't be avoided—for to look up to the ceiling, in that case the two chins unavoidably meet—and to look down into each other's laps, the foreheads come into immediate contact, which at once puts an end to the conference—I mean to the sentimental part of it.—What is left, Madam, is not worth stooping for.

(Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* 274)

Shandy thus signals to the knowing, worldly reader that he was perfectly aware of the sexual nature of the interview, but that his sense of decorum did not permit him to declare a meaning which he deemed unsuitable for lady readers. But who could possibly miss his hints?

And, of course, the mystery of the “lambent pupilability of slow, low, dry chat five notes below the natural tone” appears to be the same mystery before which the reader of “Ligeia” is made to stare in perplexity. Ligeia too spoke to her husband in a very low voice, at a time when he was busy scrutinizing her “pupils.” These two details imply the same kind of sexual intimacy hinted by Shandy, but, of course, in Poe's tale, this intimacy took place at the point of death. Moreover, Sterne humorously declares what Glanvill mystically intimates: that it is “dangerous” for a man to look into a woman's eye, while slyly drawing attention to what went on “below.” Thus, the text is structured on the same metonymical association between sex and the eye which Glanvill had literalised. There is, of course, one significant difference between Poe's narrator and Shandy: the former seems to be sincerely baffled by the mystery. As a consequence, the ridiculousness of the

mystery reflects on him: whereas Shandy comes through as sophisticated and sly, Poe's narrator manages only to make a fool of himself, once again.

It appears to me that the conjugation of these uncommon elements, a private interview held in very low tones involving looking *through* the pupil and sly sexual innuendos, defines the coordinates by which the allusion may be detected—or rather, these coordinates constitute a covert allusion. As we have seen, the narrator himself invites the reader to go source-hunting when he tells us that his feelings were inspired by books, and, in this case, the specificity of this combination is indeed sufficiently distinctive as to narrow the range of possible sources to one single text. In fact, inasmuch as *Tristram Shandy* may be regarded as one the fundamental texts in the shared culture of the early nineteenth century, a knowledge of which could be presumed of any competent reader, I regard the allusion as being one of those “unités proprement stylistiques [que] s'imposent à l'attention du lecteur, (...) dont la perceptibilité est obligatoire,” to use Riffaterre's terminology (“L'Explication” 12). Indeed, this allusion appears to me a perfect illustration of that critic's concept of “paragramme,” which roughly corresponds to what I have termed “buried allusion:” “je ne verrais,” he writes, “de paragramme, au sens restreint ou au sens large, que lorsqu'un élément du texte me forcerait à chercher un métatexte” (15).

A buried allusion, as I conceive it, then, is a semantic structure by which the text constrains, as it were, the reader to look for a “metatext.” For Riffaterre, however, this sort of mechanism necessarily enforces ambiguity: “L'ambiguïté que l'explication devrait éviter de dissiper ne résulte pas d'une mélecture, d'une incompréhension qui varierait avec les lecteurs. Elle est dans le texte: y sont encodées à la fois qu'un choix est possible entre plusieurs interprétations, et l'impossibilité de décider de ce choix. (...) Pour que la polysémie joue un rôle dans le style, il faut que la plurilecture soit imposée au lecteur” (Riffaterre, “L'Explication” 14-15). It appears to me that this is not a common characteristic of literature, but only of some literary texts. As we have seen, Romanticism attempted to create the hesitation Riffaterre describes. It seems to me that Poe evidently used buried

allusions to create an opposite effect: to imply, precisely, that the confusion his narrator experiences is the result of a misreading he himself had promoted.

It may be useful to distinguish the two types of buried allusions involved in the mystery of Ligeia's eyes which we have hitherto identified. In the first type, the source is not named at all, but only implied. Thus, both *Tristram Shandy* and *Wieland* are evoked. The allusion to Glanvill, which more exactly corresponds to the sort of ruse practiced by Poe in *Pinakidia* and *Marginalia*, belongs to a second type of allusion that works by indirection. We are pointed towards Glanvill, but by way of a quotation that is, to all indication, fabricated. Once again, Poe proves that readers must form a decision about such allusions on appearances alone. The old-fashioned style, the theme, the mystical tendency of the passage make it a superficially convincing counterfeit of a seventeenth-century English religious writer, and so we accept the passage, as it were, provisionally. The narrator's doubts concerning attribution, however, are Poe's way of slyly inviting the reader to visit Glanvill's work, where we will not find the "quotation" he used as a motto for Ligeia, but many other passages that exactly match the spirit of "Ligeia." Thus, the announced collapse of the vague ostensible allusion, the meaning of which was necessarily conjectured by the reader on trust, reveals the real allusion, on which Poe's meaning hangs.

Poe, who had a shrewd understanding of fiction, knew the leisurely reader does not bother to follow a lead, be it a clue to murder or an allusion. This reader expects to be entertained by his reading—most of the time, that is what we all expect from our reading. And, since it would be impossible to keep the meaning in suspense pending the verification of an obscure allusion, we guess its meaning by approximation. Poe thought that it was the poet's duty to exploit these shadowy processes of inference to create illusions. Accordingly, he used his allusions to trick the public into all kinds of misapprehensions, diverting attention from his satire, which was designed to show that poets could sometimes abuse their power over the reader's responses to promote delusion, and inflated conceptions of the role of poetry itself. The two allusions I have analysed in

this section further this design by returning a sexual meaning where a transcendental idea had been promised.

Poe proves his point—that only exceptionally will the reader follow a hint—even more conclusively in his review of William Newnham’s *Human Magnetism*, which appeared on April 5, 1845, in the *Broadway Journal*. Indeed, despite having been regarded by many as evidence of Poe’s endorsement of the doctrine of Animal Magnetism, or “Human Magnetism,” as Newnham prefers to term it, Poe’s short review is evidently ironic, and its irony is certainly not of the “Romantic” variety.<sup>90</sup> The satire is confirmed, and its meaning clarified by an allusion which, although direct and entirely accurate, I suspect the critics who support that view did not look up. Indeed, the allusion is itself ironic, inasmuch as Poe effectively dissuades the reader from finding the passage to which he alludes by making its meaning appear obvious.

Poe opens his article with a quotation from the “Introductory Chapter” of the work under appreciation. That chapter is all one needs to detect Poe’s ruse—that is, if one pays close attention to both texts. In a passage Poe transcribes, Newnham explains his conversion to the mesmeric faith<sup>91</sup>. He had originally intended to debunk the claims of the “mesmerists,” and, with this end in view, conducted a research that afforded what he regards as “indisputable” evidence that the most extravagant claims of the mesmerists *could* be false. One would suppose such evidence would have

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90 Carroll Dee Lavery, for example, explicitly evokes this review as evidence of Poe’s adherence to the theory: “There are, however, certain facts that suggest a belief in mesmerism. He considered the Rev. Mr. Townshend’s work on the subject ‘one of the most truly profound and philosophical books of the day.’ And he asserted that in general he agreed with the conclusions of W. Newnham in his book on mesmerism” (304). Lavery alludes to two statements Poe makes in his review of *Human Magnetism*. As we shall see, however, both statements are evidently not meant to be taken seriously.

Sidney Lind, on the other hand, thought that Poe did not like Newnham’s book, but “was appreciative of the forcefulness of Townshend’s reasoning” (“Poe and Mesmerism” 1089).

More recently, Bruce Mills, in *Poe, Fuller and the Mesmeric Arts* (2009), has argued that Poe’s adherence to the “science” of Animal Magnetism was complete.

91 “About twelve months since, I was asked by some friends to write a paper *against* mesmerism—and I was furnished with materials by a highly esteemed quondam pupil, which proved incontestably that under some circumstances the operator might be duped—that hundreds of enlightened persons might equally be deceived—and certainly went far to show that the pretended science was wholly a delusion, a system of fraud and jugglery by which the imaginations of the credulous were held in thralldom through the arts of the designing. Perhaps in an evil hour I assented to the proposition thus made—but on reflection I found that the facts before me only led to the direct proof that certain phenomena might be counterfeited; and the existence of counterfeit coin is rather a proof that there is somewhere a genuine standard gold to be imitated” (Newnham, *Human Magnetism* 9). Poe reviews in his article the American edition of Newnham’s book, which had been previously that same year appeared in London. My quotations of the book are extracted from the former.

confirmed his skepticism. Surprisingly, it had the opposite effect on Newnham, who ultimately concluded that the possibility of either delusion or fraud actually *proved* the reality of the most extravagant claims of the mesmerists. The argument that supports this conclusion is that nothing can be “counterfeited” that does not exist. Incidentally, Newnham’s reasoning very nearly resembles Glanvill’s, at least in its effects, for he too implies that all reports of seemingly impossible phenomena are necessarily true. His statement about counterfeits, although linguistically correct, is logically unsound, indeed preposterous, as Poe points out: “the fallacy here is obvious, and lies in a mere variation of what the logicians style ‘begging the question.’ (...) Now in the case of mesmerism our author is merely *begging the admission*. / Such reasoning as this has an ominous look on the very first page of a scientific work—and accordingly we were not surprised to find Mr. Newnham’s treatise illogical throughout” (Rev. of *Human Magnetism* 69).

Thus, Poe makes his contempt for the book perfectly plain. But then comes the puzzling part of the article, in which Poe appears to contradict his opening statements: “Not that we do not thoroughly coincide with him in his general views—but that we attain (for the most part) his conclusions by different, and we hope more legitimate routes than his own” (Poe, Rev. of *Human Magnetism* 69). This comes as a complete surprise. After he exposed the reasoning on which Newnham’s entire defense of mesmerism was rooted, one would expect Poe rather to *disagree* with him.

Things get even more puzzling with Poe’s next sentence: “In some important points—his ideas of *prévision*, for example, and the *curative* effects of magnetism—we radically disagree” (Poe, Rev. of *Human Magnetism* 70). Poe alludes here to the ability to predict the future, visit faraway lands in spirit, and cure otherwise incurable diseases, which most adepts of Animal Magnetism believed were possessed by “somnambulists.” But, if Poe disagrees with Newnham on these two points, I am afraid there is not much left with which he could agree with the author of



*Human Magnetism*, as the avowed purpose of the book is to promote the belief precisely in miraculous cures and *clairvoyance*, as the author makes perfectly clear in his preface.

There is, however, another “point” in which Poe disagrees with Newnham: “most especially do we disagree with him in his (implied) disparagement of the work of Chauncey Hare Townshend, which we regard as one of the most truly profound and philosophical works of the day—a work to be valued properly only in a day to come” (Rev. of *Human Magnetism* 70). The common misconception that Poe endorsed the most startling “facts” of mesmerism must ultimately be traced to this sentence. After accusing a book on the subject of being completely “illogical,” Poe suddenly expresses admiration—as it seems—for Townshend, one of the firmest believers in the extra-sensorial perception of “somnambulists” and in their ability to effect miraculous cures. Indeed, it is hard to understand how exactly Poe could “radically” disagree with Newnham, when Newnham himself was in complete agreement with Townshend in precisely those “points” in which Poe disagrees with the former. How could this be? This might be taken as one of those irredeemable contradictions of which Poe is supposed to have been very fond. It is the same kind of apparent contradiction that is involved in his ostensible endorsement of the very “transcendentalism” he spent his time ridiculing. The conventional answer to this sort of conundrum is to presume Poe did not really mean what he said, or that he was carried away by his desire for distinction.<sup>92</sup>

But, in this case, this is manifestly the wrong answer. As usual, Poe provides a clue to the correct one: “We hope, however, that nothing here said by us will influence a single individual to neglect a perusal of the book of Mr. Newnham. It should be read, as a vast store-house of suggestive facts, by all who pretend to keep pace with modern philosophy” (Rev. of *Human Magnetism* 70).

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92 I have already mentioned Floyd Stovall’s theory that Poe agreed with the very views he attacked. Another case in point is the following passage from Stuart and Susan Levine’s Introduction to a recent edition of Poe’s *Eureka*: “Poe complains in various pieces about transcendentalism in general and about Ralph Waldo Emerson in particular, but he is often very close to Emerson” (xvi). By way of illustration, the editors quote a passage in *Eureka* in which “Poe’s narrator” employs the word “consistent,” remarking that in his poem “Blight” “Emerson uses ‘same’ to mean just about what Poe does” by “consistent,” concluding from this that: “Emerson in fact deals with science just the way Poe does” (xvi).

It appears to me, rather, that such similarities warrant the supposition that Poe meant to mock Emerson. At any rate, in both “Ligeia” and the review of Newnham’s book, he approaches science in a way that appears to me to be the opposite of Emerson’s.

The irony of this remark is obvious—Poe had just destroyed Newnham—, but can only be fully appreciated by those who read *Human Magnetism*—or, at least, its “Introductory Chapter,” which of course very few will be inclined to do after reading Poe’s review. Poe’s ambiguous statements had suggested that he disliked the book, but agreed with its doctrines; its perusal, however, shows us that this was not the case. Thus, Poe’s true meaning comes to light: what he meant was that the book was a particularly good illustration of what he thought was the general decay of philosophy in his time.

As it turns out, Newnham does not “disparage” the “truly pious and excellent Townshend” (Rev. of *Human Magnetism* 13). On the contrary, Townshend’s is the last name in a long list of witnesses from which, Newnham writes, “your reporter has *not withheld* his belief,” and which includes contemporaries like Berthollet, Cuvier, Deleuze, Colqhoun, Elliotson, but also Puysegur, Mesmer’s first disciple, and, in fact, almost everyone that had ever written “for” Animal Magnetism (*Human Magnetism* 30). Indeed, the only name conspicuously missing from the list is Mesmer himself, whose reputation was, in those days, far worse than that of the discipline he had founded. “Chauncey Hare Townshend,” then, concludes this open list of respectable men whose testimony Newnham regarded as absolutely unimpeachable, and which was broad enough to include “many others not enumerated” (30-31).

The list is so broad, indeed, as to make it apparent that Newnham believed virtually everything he read about “human magnetism.” No matter how improbable the tale, if it came from any of these highly respectable men, it was true. In fact, Newnham had much to say on the subject of probability: “Our present argument rests on the calculation of probabilities, and has been employed as an unanswerable reply to Hume’s celebrated sophistry, with regard to the number of witnesses necessary to establish the truth of a *miracle*, which he affirms to be *far greater* than the testimony required for the establishment of any natural phenomenon” (*Human Magnetism* 32). The

author of *Human Magnetism*, of course, disagrees. I guess now we know exactly where we stand with Newnham.

As for Townshend, Newnham's only fear is that the public will not believe him implicitly—as implicitly as Newnham himself believed him. Indeed, he thought the only defect of Townshend's *Facts in Mesmerism* was the fact of its author being a “clergyman, whose habits, it will be supposed, were not such as to lead him scrupulously to examine the laws of evidence, and who might easily be deceived by the designing” (14). Likewise, the *Isis Revelata*,<sup>93</sup> by J. C. Colquhoun, “[b]y far the best work on this ill-fated question,” did not turn public opinion in favor of Animal Magnetism, according to Newnham, because its author was a “barrister,” and not a “medical person” (14).

Our initial reading of Poe's claim that Townshend's book will “be valued properly only in a day to come” is determined by the suggestion that Newnham had disparaged him. The suggested meaning depends, therefore, on the false representation of Newnham's relationship with Townshend that Poe tricks us into forming, and which can only be dispelled by reading his book. Newnham implies that Townshend was right, but no one would believe him, and this is the only thing on the former's “Introductory Chapter” that can be construed, however vaguely, as a “disparagement.” Therefore, when Poe disagrees with Newnham's opinion, he implies that the latter's fears are ungrounded; that is, that Townshend may actually succeed in converting a great number of people to Animal Magnetism.

Now we also understand what Poe meant by calling *Human Magnetism* a “storehouse of suggestive facts.” Although “illogical throughout,” these books will produce irresistible beliefs on the unwary reader who neglects to examine the matter dispassionately and is carried away by his

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93 The 1836 edition of *Isis Revelata* is an expanded edition of Colquhoun's 1833 *Report of the Experiments of Animam Magnetism, Made by a Committee of the Medical Section of the French Royal Academy of Sciences*. This is the report of the second commission appointed by the French Academy of Sciences, not to be confused with the first, which had been led by Benjamin Franklin in 1784.

hankering after the sensational. This is precisely what Poe intimates in the last paragraph of his review, while ostensibly agreeing with Newnham:

In saying above that we disagree with the author in some of his ideas of the *curative* effects of magnetism, we are not to be understood as disputing, in any degree, the prodigious importance of the mesmeric influence in surgical cases:—that limbs, for example, have been amputated without pain through such influence, is what we feel to be fact. In instances such as that of Miss Martineau, however, we equally feel the weakness of attributing the *cure* to magnetism. Those who wish to examine all sides of a question would do well to dip into some medical works of authority before forming an opinion on such topics. In the case of Miss Martineau we beg leave to refer to the “London Lancet,” for March 1845, page 265 of the edition published by Burgess and Stringer. (Rev. of *Human Magnetism* 70)

This paragraph is truly a masterpiece of misdirection. Poe, then, declares his belief in the anesthetic proprieties of “magnetism,” selecting an extreme example, the amputation of a limb, thus overtasking the credulity of his reader. Nonetheless, he tells us, he believes the fact. Why? Because he “*feels*” its truth. He agrees, then, with the opinion of the writer of an illogical book because he “*feels*” that if an amputation is performed on a patient under the influence of “magnetism,” the latter will *feel* no pain. The verb he employs, of course, is suspicious. The obvious sense is disturbed by the suggestion that no one but those who experienced the “fact” would be in a condition of “feeling” its truth. Even while apparently endorsing the kind of intuitive approach to facts exemplified by the mesmerists, however, he openly states that a correct assessment of their claims required the examination of “medical works of authority,” which is placed in explicit opposition with the treatises of Newnham and Townshend, who, of course, had no medical credentials whatsoever. The precise reference to *The Lancet*, which contrasts powerfully with the vagueness of his “feeling,”

demonstrates, indeed, that Poe himself had *not* formed an opinion based on their suggestions, but sought more reliable information. He advises his reader to do the same thing.

In the transcribed passage, Poe alludes to the case of Harriett Martineau (1802-1876), a pioneering female intellectual, writer and journalist known today as one of the founders of the discipline of Sociology. At the time, however, she was garnering considerable attention from the English press for other reasons. In 1844 Martineau underwent “magnetic” treatment, under the guidance of the celebrated mesmerist Spencer T. Hall, for a very debilitating illness that had afflicted her for years, and which had until then resisted conventional therapy. Shortly afterwards, her condition improved considerably, and, ascribing her almost complete recovery to the “magnetic” therapy to which she had subjected herself, she became one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the movement. In 1845 she published her own account of the case under the title *Letters on Mesmerism*.

In Chapter VII of *Human Magnetism*, devoted to the subject of “magnetic” cures, Newnham mentions in passing the case of a “well-known literary lady, who has for some years been greatly suffering, and who has been relieved by magnetism,” without naming Martineau (*Human Magnetism* 132). In an appendix, however, Newnham breaks the secret and transcribes “extracts (...) from Miss Martineau’s account of her own case:” “‘During these five years, I never felt wholly at ease for one single hour. I seldom had severe pain: but never entire comfort. A besetting sickness, almost disabling from taking food for two years, brought me very low; and, together with other evils, it confined me to a condition of almost entire stillness; —to a life passed between my bed and my sofa’” (qtd. in Newnham, *Human Magnetism* 387).

In the portion of her book Newnham transcribes, Martineau goes on to tell how her illness, which had resisted conventional approaches for five years, and at length had made an invalid of her, was practically defeated by some months of “magnetic” treatment. But there is something missing from both Newnham’s brief summary of the case and from his appendix. Neither explains exactly

what ailed Martineau. In fact, she herself had evaded the issue in her book: “This is not the place in which to give any details of the disease” (Martineau, *Letters* 3).

Diligent as ever, Poe found his answers elsewhere: “in page 265” of the American edition of the renowned medical journal *The Lancet* for the first semester of 1845 we find an article entitled “Miss Martineau’s Case.” This is a summary of the report of Martineau’s case by her personal physician and brother-in-law Thomas Michael Greenhow, who was not at all convinced that the magnetic influence had been the cause of the alleviation of the patient’s sufferings.<sup>94</sup> His detailed medical report, unlike Newnham’s statement of the matter, leaves nothing to the imagination.

Greenhow’s controversial decision of publishing his report appears to have had two motivations. First, as a medical practitioner, he resented the claim, implied in his patient’s account of her illness, that he had relied entirely on “opiates” to alleviate her symptoms.<sup>95</sup> Secondly, in the interest of science, he intended to prevent Martineau’s cure from being numbered among the “facts” of Animal Magnetism. In his professional opinion, Martineau’s illness had a physiological as well as a “nervous” element, that a modern doctor would term psycho-somatic. As regards the former, his diagnosis was: “Either prolapsus uteri or a polypous tumour, of fibrous nature,” which he denies having ever regarded as incurable: “Knowing well that no malignant disease of the affected organ existed, I always believed that a time would arrive, when my patient would be relieved from most of her distressing symptoms and released from her long-continued confinement” (Greenhow, “Miss

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<sup>94</sup> Greenhow was married to Harriett Martineau’s older sister, Elizabeth.

<sup>95</sup> Martineau declares that it was only “[a]fter my medical friend’s [Greenhow] avowal of his hopelessness” that she resorted to mesmerism (*Letters* 5).

Martineau's Case" 265-66).<sup>96</sup> He somewhat bitterly complains, however, that the patient would not accept his optimistic prognosis,

but seemed always best satisfied with admissions that she must ever remain a secluded invalid—an additional symptom of the morbid influence over the nervous system, of the class of diseases in which this case must be included. Oftener than once I have used the expression that, probably, before long, Miss M. *would take up her bed and walk*. In this case the advocates of mesmerism may try to find arguments in support of their opinions. But the experienced practitioner will have little difficulty in bringing the whole into harmony with the well established laws of human physiology. The condition of the uterus in December 1844, is but the natural sequel of progressive improvement began in April; and the time had arrived when a new and powerful stimulus only was required, to enable the enthusiastic mind of the patient to shake of the nervous symptoms. (266)

Magnetism, then, was that stimulus. Greenhow's diagnosis depends on the supposed association between the uterus and the kind of "nervous" symptoms he describes. During the course of the following decades, indeed, the term "hysteria," which implies this association, would gradually gain currency. This, of course, entailed the belief that women were more likely to develop psychological disorders involving somatisation than men, which in turn contributed to perpetuate the notion that they were unbalanced, and therefore less rational. We know now that this is a misconception: there is no significant correlation between uterine illness and neurosis. Greenhow

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96 I quote Greenhow's article from the American edition of *The Lancet*, retitled *The London Lancet*, mentioned by Poe. The article appears in the January 4, 1845 issue, pp. 19-20 of the original edition of journal. The article is an extract from the pamphlet T. M. Greenhow had published earlier that year, *Medical Report of the Case of Miss H — M—*" (London, 1845). The book mentioned only Martineau's initials and, therefore, the article in *The Lancet* was the first time she was explicitly identified in print as the subject of Greenhow's report.

Alexis Easley's *Literary Celebrity, Gender, and Victorian Authorship, 1850-1914* contains an in-depth discussion of the controversy: "In his report, Greenhow disputes Martineau's interpretation of her cure, arguing that it resulted from the natural progression of the disease rather than from the effects of external stimuli. In doing so, he publicized the details of her gynecological symptoms in grotesquely graphical terms. As a result of this publication and the publicity that ensued, Martineau refused any further contact with him, personal or professional" (160). Easley goes on to discuss the importance of this controversy in the broader context of an intense debate over the limits of scientific inquiry.

was undeniably subject to the preconceptions typical of the medical profession of his time. This should not prevent us from recognising, however, the importance of his testimony in the context of the debate about Animal Magnetism. His example demonstrates that doctors already had a sophisticated enough understanding of the relations between the mind and the body to be able to account for the beneficial influence of “magnetic” treatment without having to accept the theories of the adepts. In other words, Greenhow demonstrates that even at that early period, the medical community admitted that a physical ailment could be treated, or at least mitigated, through the use of purely psychological means, that is, by suggestion<sup>97</sup>. The mesmerists, of course, maintained that the process involved a magnetic “fluid.”

In his review, Poe declared, as we have seen, “we equally feel the weakness of attributing the *cure* to magnetism”, thereby implying that he agreed with Newnham on this point (Rev. of *Human Magnetism* 70 emphasis mine). Analysis of the sources proves otherwise: he agreed with Greenhow. However, Poe alludes specifically to page 265 of *The Lancet*. On the designated page, Greenhow writes: “The occupation of the vagina by the enlarged and retroverted uterus I wish to be held in view” (Greenhow, “Miss Martineau’s Case” 265). Evidently, Poe also wanted his reader to contemplate what the mesmerists had ignored, namely the clinical aspect of Martineau’s illness. In fact, considering the kind of examination that supports Greenhow’s diagnosis, the satirical intention of Poe’s very precise allusion becomes apparent:

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<sup>97</sup> The contemporary Scottish physician James Braid, who apparently coined the term “hypnotism,” is often credited with emancipating “mesmerism” from the “magnetic” theory. Though this is not the place to argue the point, I believe this to be grossly inaccurate. Although Braid reviewed the terminology, to make it more palatable to medical professionals, he essentially adhered to the traditional theory, and, more to the point, accepted the most miraculous supposed “facts” of mesmerism.

Incidentally, this had been recognised in the more prudent medical circles as early as 1845. Charles Radclyffe Hall, in an examination of the literature of “mesmerism” published in *The Lancet*, and which I outline below, offers the following very lucid remarks on Braid, and other contemporary attempts to legitimise mesmerism: “At the present time Hypnotism, the mental offspring of Mr. Braid, a surgeon at Manchester, differs from mesmerism as previously known, in not requiring the assistance of a second person to produce the effects. Mesmero-phrenology, phreno-magnetism, or phrenopathy, is a combination of the most startling parts of mesmerism with the least probable ones in phrenology” (“On the Rise, No. 1” 322).

It should be added that Radclyffe Hall did not deny all effects, but he consistently regarded them as strictly psychological phenomena. In this connection, the only author he thought had approached these matters scientifically was J. P. Catlow—not James Braid—whom, he writes, “is by no means to be enrolled amongst the supporters of mesmerism, as commonly understood, many of his views being ingenious and philosophical” (“On the Rise, No. 2” 405n11).



[o]ccasional examinations of the affected organ took place, but no change could be discovered, excepting the appearance of a membranous substance at the os uteri, which, generally, scarcely protruded beyond its lips, though occasionally described as larger, resembling the appearance observed at Venice, though smaller. It proceeded from the uterus, and had no attachment to the neck, the finger passing round it on all sides, naturally giving rise to the renewed supposition that the uterus contained a polypus growth, whose separation might be effected by time. (Greenhow, “Miss Martineau’s Case” 265 emphasis mine)

Anyone wishing to “examine all sides of a question,” Poe wrote, “would do well to *dip* into” page 265 of *The Lancet*. Through his allusion, he forces us, as it were, to *dip* into the “matter” by proxy. In the context, the choice of this verb is, of course, positively mischievous. But Poe knew very well that he was safe; that neither the general public nor the editors of magazines of general circulation were in the habit of reading scientific journals. And here lies the sharpest barb of his review. Poe intimates that, by submitting to misplaced notions of decorum, the press favored the propagation of humbugs like Animal Magnetism, which he so cunningly exposes to ridicule.

Poe’s allusion to *The London Lancet* is also significant in another respect. Newnham stated that only a physician could successfully defeat the skepticism about the “facts” of magnetism. He thus suggests that no inquiry into the matter had yet been attempted by a physician. Poe, displaying a medical reading which Newnham evidently did not possess, shows that this was not the case. The same volume of the *Lancet* that contained the letter by Harriet Martineau’s physician also contained the first installments of a long and detailed study of the subject by Charles Radclyffe Hall, entitled “On the Rise, Progress, and Mysteries of Mesmerism in All Ages and Countries.” This was a thoroughgoing and well documented examination of the opinions of all the leading magnetisers going back to Mesmer himself. Poe found Newnham’s book “illogical throughout;” Radclyffe conclusively demonstrates that the majority of the books written on the subject, from which he

quotes liberally, were equally illogical. A common misconception regarding the early debate over Animal Magnetism is that the adepts upheld the therapeutic virtues of suggestion against the skeptics, who denied it. In reality, it was the other way around. Radclyffe Hall thought that so called “magnetic” cures, such as Martineau’s, whose case involved a real physiological element, illustrated what became known as the placebo effect, while the adepts attributed it to the action of “magnetism.”<sup>98</sup>

Along with the report of the first French commission charged with the examination of the claims of the mesmerists, led by Benjamin Franklin, and which had long been translated into English, Radclyffe Hall’s treatise is a must read for anyone interested in examining the controversy. These are the true forerunners of the scientific study of hypnotism and suggestion. Poe evidently knew both sides of the question and was not impressed with the arguments that had been presented by the mesmerists. Radclyffe Hall notices that these invariably employed the age-old argument of authority. Exasperated, he makes the following answer: “As well might one hesitate to disbelieve in the elixir of life and transmutation of metals, because he had not examined and refuted the thousand facts, so called, on the numerous works on occult science! If we can disprove the facts asserted in every similar instance, we may safely neglect the others recorded, of many of the conditions of which we must necessarily be ignorant” (Hall, “On the Rise. No. 1” 216).<sup>99</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Indeed, Greenhow’s text demonstrates his awareness of the importance of the placebo effect, which is generally recognised by modern medicine, as the following passages from a modern manual of general medicine illustrates: “We now know that the administration of placebos may have profound effects, both good and bad. (...) This (...) becomes more understandable and is put into perspective once one recognises that there are 2 components of the placebo response. One is the anticipation (usually optimistic) of effects because of the expectations associated with medication. One can call this ‘suggestibility,’ ‘faith,’ ‘hope,’ or whatever. / The (second) component, however, is at times even more important—spontaneous change. If a placebo has been taken before improvement, it may be given credit” (“Placebo” 1527-28).

Greenhow evidently thought this second component was chiefly responsible for Martineau’s faith in mesmerism. He also thought, of course, the symptoms had themselves been aggravated by his patient’s negative expectations. This demonstrates, I think, his awareness of the mechanisms of suggestion, and even of its potential for therapeutic uses.

<sup>99</sup> Radclyffe Hall quotes Colquhoun, author of *Isis Revelata*, according to whom critics had to “prove that their authors ‘were and are fools, or knaves and liars,’ and that nature herself is ‘an arrant quack and impostor;’ before they can ‘be allowed to boast of having refuted animal magnetism’” (“On the Rise. No. 1” 216).

Poe remarked that the logic of Newnham was flawed; Colquhoun was no less remarkable for illogical reasoning. Bruce Mills, however, completely missing the point of Poe’s review of *Human Magnetism*, sets Colquhoun as a model of scientific reasoning, and as a following in the footsteps of the likes of Newton and Copernicus: “scientists and scholars repeatedly reminded readers of the need to practice intellectual humility in the face of new and remarkable findings,” and Colquhoun had attempted to lead people “to more enlightened understandings of human will and the

It may appear to my reader that I digress. It appears to me, however, that this episode demonstrates that Poe never really endorsed the common “transcendentalist” approach to science. In fact, in his review of *Human Magnetism*, he ridiculed it by the same kind of allusion he had employed in “Ligeia.” And the popular narrative of Martineau’s case which he indirectly ridicules has something else in common with Poe’s tale. Sex, though ostensibly absent, is at the heart of the matter. But sex had become a forbidden subject for a magazinist like Poe, and therefore had to be obfuscated. Supposedly for their own good, the general public was being prevented from forming informed opinions on matters that were discussed openly in specialised forums. Evidently, this was done with a view to spare the gentle female reader.

Gilbert and Gubar have argued that the rejection of carnality that characterised patriarchal discourses resulted in a sort of symbolical mutilation of the female body. Duessa, a female witch in Spenser’s *The Fairie Queene*, who “is deformed below the waist,”

significantly (...) deceives and ensnares men by assuming the shape of Una, the beautiful and angelic heroine who represents Christianity, charity, docility. Similarly, Lucifera [another character in Spenser] lives in what seems to be a lovely mansion, a cunningly constructed House of Pride whose weak foundation and ruinous rear quarters are carefully concealed. Both women use their arts of deception to entrap and destroy men, and the secret, shameful ugliness of both is closely associated with their hidden genitals—that is, with their femaleness. (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 30)

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operations of the mind,” in works he describes as “fully researched examinations of animal magnetism” which “include extensive reviews of published material” (Poe, *Fuller* 22-23).

Colquhoun, of course, did much more than advocate scientific “humility”—he preached wholesale credulity. In any case, Mills shows complete insensibility to the signs of irony in Poe’s review. More importantly, he evidently did not follow his clue to *The Lancet*. Mills writes: “For modern readers who look back on Franz Anton Mesmer’s theory of animal magnetism and nineteenth-century studies of mesmeric consciousness as ‘pseudo’-science, it is easy to fall into the kind of skepticism that Emerson apparently felt and to attribute evidence of inexplicable powers to both skillful trickery and deception” (Poe, *Fuller* x). Here he suggests that *no one* at the time saw the “facts” of animal magnetism as pseudo-science. Yet, this is precisely how Radclyffe Hall looked at the phenomenon as early as 1845—and he was not alone.

I think the irony in both “Ligeia” and the review of *Human Magnetism* constitutes a deliberate challenge to the ideology that had determined the suppression of sexual identity, and sexuality itself. Poe’s mischievous allusions, and sly innuendos inexorably lead, precisely, to the female genitalia. And, by this act of indirect exposure of what, according to the prevailing ideology of his time, should remain hidden, he also highlights the potentially disastrous consequences of ignoring a fundamental dimension of human experience.

As I see it, “Ligeia” is a tale *about* sex, in all senses of the word. But his review of *Animal Magnetism* shows us, albeit in a humorous fashion, that this was a subject that could only be treated, at least in the generalist press, by stealth—through suggestion. And suggestion could be a very dangerous thing. The narrator of “Ligeia,” for example, influenced by the misogynous Glanvill, *felt* it was dangerous to look into Ligeia’s eyes, but could not remember exactly why. However, he appears to have had no qualms about raping, and even killing women. Indeed, the definitive version of the femicide moral of the tale depends on Glanvill. It goes more or less as follows: “It is *safe* for a man to rape, or even to kill a witch—and all women are potential witches—, just as long as he does not look her in the eye.” And this, the horrible truth about the femicide, was in turn what the public was not being allowed to look in the eye.

## 6 — The Philosophy of Decomposition: “Ligeia” and *Memoirs of the Rev. William Tennent, Jr.*

Up to this point, I have proceeded to a systematical examination of the many supposed facts that support the narrator’s supernatural thesis, with a view to show that they are, in fact, very questionable interpretations of the real facts, none of which can be said to be free from suggestion. However, a supposed medical fact still stands that would invalidate my conclusion that the corpse of Rowena and the ghost of Ligeia were two separate entities that the narrator had merged in his delirium, fuelled conjointly by guilt and by his desire for the dead.

What the narrator terms a “drama of revivification” could equally be described as a drama of mortification. Indeed, the narrator claims that “each terrific relapse was only into a sterner and apparently more irredeemable death” (Poe, “Ligeia” 329). He indirectly backs his assertion, some lines below, by boasting “no little medical reading” (328). In itself, however, his sentence is not very flattering for the narrator’s pretensions. Are we to understand that the adjective “irredeemable” varies in degree? Does he mean to imply that the corpse was getting “deader?” This is, of course, absurd, for death is, by definition, irredeemable. But, quite apart from this terminological impropriety, which manifests the narrator’s confusion, there is something else in the narrator’s reasoning that totally invalidates both his conclusion and his pretensions to medical knowledge. He thought that Rowena’s corpse looked much *deader* than it should have been at that point—dead, say, as *only Ligeia could have been*.

This, however, contrary to his suggestions, is *not* a medical fact. I said the narrator does not lie, but he does make mistakes. I am afraid this piece of supposed medico-legal evidence is an instance of this. Sitting on his ottoman, he had the sensation the corpse was coming back to life. “Suddenly,” however, “the color fled, the pulsation ceased, the lips resumed the expression of the dead, and, in an instant afterward, the whole body took upon itself the icy chilliness, the livid hue, the intense rigidity, the sunken outline, and all the loathsome peculiarities of that which had been,

for many days, a tenant of the tomb” (Poe, "Ligeia" 328). He seems to know what he is looking for, thus demonstrating that he was indeed acquainted with medical literature. However, the conclusion that he draws from this evidence is not backed by the medical literature. One does not need a degree in medicine to know this is *not* what a corpse would have looked like after “many days.” The narrator appears to be wholly unaware of putrefaction.

The state in which he found Rowena, after those elusive signs of life subsided, is exactly what one would expect of a day-old corpse. For the narrator has just accurately described signs of *recent* decease which were already well known to doctors of that period, including *rigor*, *algor*, and *livor mortis*.<sup>100</sup> He had evidently read somewhere that these signs were used to determine the time of death, as indicated by his boast, but had forgotten what they meant. Thus, he actually displays no little medical *misreading*. This is not all that surprising. After all, we already knew he was not much of a student.

Thus, we once again discover the narrator presents as wonderful a fact which, being perfectly consistent with basic, well known laws of nature, was entirely predictable. Thus, we find here at work the same sort of irony of the episode of the shadow. Given his ignorance of the philosophy of the decomposition of corpses, the narrator took the supposedly wonderful “mortification” of Rowena as proof that he was not just imagining things, and this in turn somewhat paradoxically confirmed him in the belief that Ligeia had briefly, and miraculously, come to life. Indeed, the supposed fact of Rowena’s body being much “deader” than it should is decisive to establish the impression that a miracle took place.

In view of this, there is even a sort of humor—let us call it mortician humor—in the phrase the narrator employs to describe the first of the multiple supposed “relapses” of Rowena: “all the

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<sup>100</sup> Indeed, *The Cyclopædia of Practical Medicine* (1832-5), a common medical reference work, contained a long article by T. E. Beatty entitled “Persons Found Dead” in which all these signs of death are described in considerable detail.

The article even mentions “[t]hat peculiar cast of countenance termed from its first describer the *Hippocratic*.” This is what Poe’s narrator terms “sunken outline.” The word “sunken,” indeed, is prominent in the translation of Hippocrates classical description provided by Beatty: “The forehead wrinkled and dry; the eye sunken; (...) the temples sunken, hollow, and retired; (...) the cheeks sunken” (319).

usual rigorous stiffness immediately supervened” (Poe, "Ligeia" 327). “Rigorous stiffness” is an unjustifiable pleonasm, the first word of the pair being cognate with “rigor” (as in *rigor mortis*), which is Latin for “stiffness.” This linguistic blunder, of which the meticulous Poe must have been aware, appears to be another consequence of that medical misreading which helped the would-be coroner confuse Rowena with the entombed Ligeia. The real point of the joke, however, is that the “usual” stiffness “supervened” on schedule, for it is indeed usual for *rigor mortis* to set in within the first twenty-four hours after decease. Although the bio-chemical mechanism underlying the phenomenon was not yet understood, the fact itself was already common knowledge for well-read doctors in Poe’s day. *The Cyclopædia of Practical Medicine* (1832-5), for example, clarified that: “The rigidity of the body is a criterion of great value, as it points out the general contraction of the muscular fibres that occurs shortly after dissolution;” the article also points out that some diseases produced a similar stiffness, but that this “can never be confounded with cadaverous rigidity if proper attention be paid to the facts connected with it; for” in such cases “it takes place immediately after the invasion of the disease, and always precedes apparent death,” which was evidently not the case with Rowena (Beatty, “Persons Found Dead” 318). The same source points out that the stiffness is fleeting, and that “it is only when suppleness is restored that putrefaction commences” (318). The rigidity of Rowena’s body, in short, is not strange at all; on the other hand, the persistence of that rigidity for “many days,” which the narrator regards as a normal occurrence, would be truly wonderful.

Apart from the confusion between Ligeia and Rowena, the most important clue that indicates that the “drama of revivification” was an illusion is the intermittency of the supposed signs of reanimation mentioned by the narrator. He claims, for example, that the heart of the woman before him—whoever she was—had a pulse, but that this entirely ceased as soon as he started “reanimating” her. This sequence is then repeated an indeterminate number of times. I am convinced that Poe picked up the details of this “drama” in a very obscure book, to which I suspect

his phrase “a tenant of the tomb” is a punning allusion: the anonymous biography of William Tennent, Jr., attributed to Elias Boudinot (1740-1821), published in 1827 in Philadelphia with the suggestive title *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. William Tennent, Formerly Pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Freehold, in New Jersey, in which is contained among other interesting particulars, an Account of his being Three Days in a Trance, and Apparently Lifeless*.<sup>101</sup> The subject of the biography, William Tennent, Jr. (1705-1777) was the second son of William Tennent, Sr., an Irish Minister who came to America in 1718 with his wife and four sons and who is now mostly remembered as the founder of the “Log College,” the predecessor of the College of New Jersey, which still later became Princeton University.

William Tennent, Jr. had in his youth, sometime before 1733, been apparently dead for three days.<sup>102</sup> However, he completely recovered from this crisis. In fact, after enjoying a relatively long life—certainly what would be considered a long life in those days—he died a natural death in 1777. The written account of his trance and subsequent resuscitation from which I have derived this information appeared many years later, in 1806. The parallel between the extraordinary episode in Tennent’s biography, as told by Boudinot—presuming he is indeed the author of the anonymous biography of the former pastor of Freehold—, and the corresponding passages in “Ligeia” is very striking. As we have seen, Rowena’s (or Ligeia’s) body did not exhibit, as the narrator thought, “all the loathsome peculiarities of that which has been, for many days, a tenant of the tomb;” in fact, it exhibited none of them (Poe, “Ligeia” 328). Yet, although it did not look like *a* tenant of the tomb, the corpse presented all those peculiarities, with a single, decisive exception, that the body of

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101 According to Archibald Alexander, which included the narrative in his *Biographical Sketches of the Founder, and Principal Alumni of the Log College* (1845), the text had been published originally in *The Assembly’s Literary Magazine* in 1806, “and although it was not accompanied with the author’s name, it was well understood to be from the pen of the Hon. Elias Boudinot.” Alexander remarks, however, that Boudinot should be regarded more as the editor of the narrative, “the greater part” of which “was written, at his request, by the late Dr. Henderson, of Freehold” (*Biographical Sketches* 161).

My quotations were taken from what appears to be the earliest publication of the narrative in book form, from 1827. Other editions of the pamphlet followed in 1828, 1833, 1847 and 1848. I could not locate the magazine edition mentioned by Alexander.

102 The biography does not provide an exact date for the extraordinary events which concern us here. It stated only that they took place sometime before October 1733, when Tennent became the pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Freehold, New Jersey (see Boudinot, *Memoirs* 23).



William Tennent, whose name is a perfect homophone of “tenant,” had exhibited during the three days that mediated between his apparent death and supposed resurrection.

Tennent was then going through an especially trying period in his life: “After a regular course of study in theology,” he “was preparing for his examination by the Presbytery, as a candidate for the Gospel ministry. His intense application afflicted his health, and brought on a pain in his breast, and slight hectic” (Boudinot, *Life* 12). Finally overcome, as it seems, by the excessive strain of his studies, “he fainted and died away” (12). Here, Tennent’s collapse is ambiguously referred by a phrase that allows two interpretations, both actual and apparent death. This ambiguity pervades the whole narrative, just as it does the final scene of “Ligeia,” where, as we have seen, the narrator wonders whether Rowena might not have been prematurely pronounced dead. Tennent’s biographer, however, will later unambiguously betray his conviction that Tennent had not merely fainted, but actually died.

Certain signs indicate, however, that a medical friend of Tennent’s, “a young man who was attached to him by the strictest and warmest friendship,” did not share that opinion (Boudinot, *Life* 12). As it seems, this medical friend is the unsung hero of the tale. He appears to have very narrowly avoided the premature burial of the future pastor of Freehold. Gilbert Tennent, the supposed deceased’s brother, being perfectly convinced of William, Jr.’s death, arranged for his body to be prepared for burial. During the process: “one of the persons who had assisted in laying out the body thought he had observed a little tremor of the flesh under the arm,” but no one but the medical friend valued the report: “he endeavoured to ascertain the fact. He first put his own hand into warm water, to make it as sensible as possible, and then felt under the arm, and at the heart, and affirmed that he felt an unusual warmth, though no one else could” (12, 13). Incidentally, I would like to point out the ambiguity of this sentence, which, without positively denying it, does not make clear whether the doctor verified the “tremor”—I will discuss the significance of this later on. Apart from these discreet signs of animation, the appearance of Tennent’s body, “the eyes (...) sunk, the

lips discoloured, and the whole body (...) cold and stiff,” being consistent with death, his brother was disposed to proceed with the burial, scheduled for the following day; nevertheless, at the doctor’s request, he consented to postpone the ceremony for three days, during which “all probable means were used to discover symptoms of returning life” (13). Tennent, then, seemed at this point as ambiguously poised between life and death as Rowena’s body appeared to her husband during her wake. Indeed, the signs of life mentioned by Boudinot are very similar to those noticed by the narrator of Poe’s tale, whose account of the matter contains, moreover, many of the key words of the corresponding passages in Tennent’s biography: he too speaks of “a tremor upon the lips,” of “a slight pulsation at the heart,” and even of “a warmth” that “pervaded the whole frame (Poe, “Ligeia” 328, emphasis mine). And then, the body of Rowena also exhibits all the *signs of death* listed by Tennent’s biographer, including stiffness, coldness, discoloration of the skin, and even “sunken eyes” (328).

Meanwhile, the three days’ reprieve having elapsed without any noticeable change in the “dead” man’s condition, he was about to be buried, as planned. At this point, however, a “drama of revivification” very nearly resembling that of Rowena began in earnest. As the young doctor, still hopeful, was—or so the biographer tells us—in the course of applying an “emollient ointment (...) with a feather” to the parched tongue of Tennent:

the body, to the great alarm and astonishment of all present, opened its eyes, gave a dreadful groan, and sank again into apparent death. This put an end to all thoughts of burying him, and every effort was again employed, in hopes of bringing about a speedy resuscitation. In about an hour, the eyes again opened, a heavy groan proceeded from the body, and again all appearance of animation vanished. In another hour, life seemed to return with more power, and a complete revival took place, to the great joy of the family and friends, and to the no small astonishment and

conviction of the very many who had been ridiculing the idea of restoring to life a dead body. (Boudinot, *Memoirs* 14-15)

The unaccountable oscillation between “animation” and “apparent death” in “Ligeia,” then, is not, as has always been supposed, *entirely* unprecedented—Tennent’s story contains all its key elements. As the mourners in Boudinot’s story are startled by a “groan,” only to see Tennent sink again into lifelessness, so the narrator of “Ligeia” was first aroused by “a sob, low, gentle, but very distinct,” which he “*felt* (...) came from the bed of ebony,” but claims that shortly afterwards “a relapse had taken place” (Poe, “Ligeia” 326).<sup>103</sup> Even the timings are similar. Boudinot tells us that after an interval of an hour Tennent uttered a second “groan;” likewise, the narrator of “Ligeia” reports that “an (..) hour” had “elapsed” when he “was a second time aware of some vague sound issuing from the region of the bed” (this time, he no longer doubted it came *from the corpse*), which sound being repeated he concluded “it was a sigh” (327). Equally significant is the fact of the restorative manoeuvres having proven initially unsuccessful on both Tennent’s and Rowena’s case, although “every effort” was “employed” on the former, and “every exertion which experience, and no little medical reading, could suggest” on the latter (Poe, “Ligeia” 328). This verbal echo, culminating a long line of coincidences, practically confirms that Poe’s “drama” is a deliberate reworking of Boudinot’s extraordinary narrative. And the coincidences do not stop there.

In both cases, the unproductive attempts at reanimation were apparently succeeded by complete revival. However, these reanimations are very different in nature. Rowena, the narrator believes, never came back to life—he supposes *Ligeia* did, but only very briefly. Afterwards, as Poe indicated in his letter to Cooke, Rowena would finally be interred *as Rowena*. This suggests, as I have repeatedly remarked, that Rowena had not been only *apparently*, but actually dead. In

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<sup>103</sup> He “felt” it came from the bed of ebony—he was not certain. He insists: “I could not have been deceived. I *had* heard the noise, however faint” (Poe, “Ligeia” 326). As I stated before, there is nothing extraordinary about his *hearing* noises. This suggests that he misconstrued the noise, and this would in turn mean that Rowena suffered no “relapse,” as he claims, but remained dead throughout. As usual, however, the narrator decides it really was a sob later on, from the evidence of other, equally ambiguous impressions.

Tennent's case, however, the resuscitation was certainly real, which suggests, in turn, that his "death" had been only apparent.

In fact, the evidence for this seems to have been much stronger than Boudinot suggests. The drama of alternating revival and mortification, in particular, appears to have been a complete fabrication. Through most of the narrative, the biographer keeps a pretense of scientific detachment by avoiding outright statements that Tennent had been dead, and employing instead such ambiguous expressions as "apparent death" to refer to his state after the collapse. Thus, he suggests that, despite being stiff, pale, cold and motionless, Tennent could have been alive. By the end of the story, however, throwing caution to the wind, the writer states that the idea of restoring life to a "*a dead body*" was not ridiculous, thus indirectly assuming, for the first time, what had remained doubtful up to that point, to wit, that Tennent had, like a modern-day Lazarus, been raised from the dead.

To support this idea, the author, who was not a direct witness to the events he reports, appears to have slightly distorted the evidence contained in a document that is presumably his source for this epoch in Tennent's life. Being "solicitous to obtain any confirmation of this extraordinary event," he "wrote to every person he could think of, likely to have conversed with Mr. Tennent on the subject" (Boudinot, *Life* 18-19n). In a footnote to his text, he transcribes in full the written testimony of the man who succeeded Tennent in the ministry of the Presbyterian church of Freehold, New Jersey, who had obtained his information directly from Tennent's mouth, who in turn had been told by his friends what happened while he was unconscious, and presumed dead.<sup>104</sup>

As we have seen, Boudinot says that the "tremor" was first identified by an unidentified person, who brought it to the attention of the medical friend, who then tried to confirm the report. I must remind my reader that this "tremor" was felt under *the left* arm, and is, therefore, a very good indication that Tennent's heart was beating.<sup>105</sup> Although this is not directly stated, the main narrative

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<sup>104</sup> Boudinot never names the author of this letter.

<sup>105</sup> Also conspicuously absent from the letter is any reference to "groans." Signs of partial reanimation prior to total revival are mentioned, but these are far less spectacular than Boudinot makes them. He tells us that everyone noticed these reanimations, and that after each all signs of animation vanished, none of which is corroborated by the letter, which contains only Tennent's own account of an intermittent reanimation. The minister supposedly told Boudinot's

conveys the impression that the “tremor,” which is there mentioned only once, was *not* confirmed by the doctor, who instead discovered *another* sign of life which no one else could confirm, an “unusual warmth”—unusual, of course, for a corpse. This is not corroborated by the unidentified correspondent whose testimony appears in the footnote, according to which the “young doctor,” William’s “particular friend,” convinced Gilbert Tennent to postpone his brother’s funeral for three days, alleging “the tremor under the arm continued. (...) During this interval many means were made use of to discover, if possible, some symptoms of life; but none appeared excepting the tremor” (Boudinot, *Life* 19n emphasis mine). That *other* sign of life, the “warmth,” is not even mentioned. More importantly, of course, the letter explicitly states that the doctor confirmed what seems to have been a pulse. According to this, then, he never attempted to reanimate a “dead body.” On the contrary, he was evidently trying to convince Gilbert Tennent that his brother was still very much alive, and being ridiculed by him for his pains: “*What! a man not dead who is cold and stiff as a stake?*” (219n). Finally, the letter also makes clear that the pulse on the supposed corpse never disappeared until a complete revival took place.

Incidentally, the phrase “all probable means were used to discover symptoms of returning life” of the main narrative, which I have quoted earlier, is an evident paraphrase of the letter in the footnote. There are many other parallelisms between the two texts which suggest that this was Boudinot’s main source of information for these events. The suggestion of resurrection is strengthened, of course, by the claim that the body had strangely oscillated between life and death for a while before a complete revival took place, and that several unsuccessful attempts at reanimation had been made. This too is entirely absent from what is presumably the source of Boudinot’s account, which states that, at the end of the three-days reprieve, the doctor had convinced Gilbert to further postpone the burial by succeeding periods of “one hour,” “half an

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correspondent that he had been ordered back to his body, and that this filled him with disgust: “nothing could have shocked me more: I cried out, Lord, must I go back! With this shock I opened my eyes in this world. When I saw I was in this world I fainted, then came to, and fainted for several times, as one probably would naturally have done in so weak a situation” (qtd. in Boudinot, *Memoirs* 20n). Boudinot apparently embellished this relatively tame narrative to make it more impressive.

hour,” and, finally, “a quarter of an hour: when just at the close of this period, on which hung his last hope, Mr. [William] Tennent opened his eyes. They then pried open his mouth, which was stiff, so as to get a quill into it, through which some liquid was conveyed into the stomach, and he by degrees recovered” (Boudinot, *Life* 20n). Judging from this statement, the revivification of Tennent appears to have been not nearly as dramatic as the biographer intimates in the main text.

If the letter was, as it appears, the source of Boudinot’s narrative, the idea that Tennent twice “sank again into apparent death” before a complete revival took place may have been inspired by a passage of the letter which contains Tennent’s own account of the matter, as heard by the unidentified correspondent (Boudinot, *Life* 14).<sup>106</sup> The reverend was convinced that his spirit had temporarily left his body, and been wafted to the presence of God. Much to his chagrin, he was then ordered back to the body he had abandoned: “nothing could have shocked me more (...). With this shock, I opened my eyes in this world. When I saw I was in this world I fainted, then came to, and fainted for several times, as one probably would have done in so weak a situation” (20n).

Thus, it becomes clear that the biographer had either tampered with the evidence, or at least rejected such testimony as indicated that Tennent had almost been buried *alive*. Archibald Alexander, who reprinted this account in *Biographical Sketches of the Founder, and Principal Alumni of the Log College* (1845), remarks that the story of William Tennent’s trance had been well-known by hearsay long before it was printed:

There can be no doubt about the authenticity of the facts here stated, however they may be accounted for. The writer has heard the same facts from elderly persons, who never had seen this published account; and they were so public, that they were generally known, not only to the people of this part of the country, but they were currently reported and fully believed, in other states. The writer has heard them, familiarly talked of in Virginia, from his childhood. (161)

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<sup>106</sup> It might be remarked that the phrase “sank again into apparent death” expresses the same thought that the narrator of “Ligeia” embodies in “a relapse had taken place” (Poe, “Ligeia” 327).

Another reference to the case appears in William Leete Stone's *Letter to Doctor A. Brigham, on Animal Magnetism* (1837), where it is evoked to support the mesmerists' claims of extra-bodily experiences:

why deny to the ethereal spirit, when in such a state [mesmeric trance], the power of visiting, in its imagination, other climes and other spheres, for its amusement, its wonder, or its instruction? Is it more wonderful than the trance of Tennant [sic], whose spirit, without controversy, did thus leave its tenement of clay, and behold things more glorious than that holy man dared to describe?" (60).

The misspelling of Tennent's name certainly suggests that Stone had the story only from hearsay, though the mistake could be a typo. In any event, I suspect the lapse—either Stone's or the typographer's—may have suggested to Poe the pun with which I believe he intended to allude—or rather to confirm his buried allusion—to the *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. William Tennent*, which I regard, on the evidence outlined in the previous pages, as Poe's source for the details of Rowena-Ligeia's supposed revivification.<sup>107</sup>

By thus mentioning *en passant* Tennent's case, Stone also suggests that the story was being presented in spiritualist circles as providing positive proof that the spirit could leave the body without death. One suspects the rumor was that Tennent had been *dead* for three days. My guess is that Boudinot, or the man from whom he commissioned the biography of Tennent, was convinced of this, and, no doubt realising that some of the information with which he had been provided, most notably that persistent tremor on the region of the heart, strongly suggested he had only fainted, adapted the testimony to accommodate his preestablished idea. Although the procedure is

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107 That Poe had no great regard for Stone is clearly indicated both by his review of his novel *Ups and Downs in the Life of a Distressed Gentleman*, which Poe suggested "should have been printed among the quack advertisements, in a spare corner" of *The New York Commercial Advertiser*, of which Stone was then the editor (218), and by the epigrammatic humorous analysis of his "handwriting" Poe would later devote to him in his "Autography" and "A Chapter on Autography."

In the last of these articles, published in two parts in November and December 1841 in *Graham's Magazine*, Poe specifically mentioned Stone's "defence of Animal magnetism," along with the aforementioned novel and "his pamphlets concerning Maria Monk," conferring on all three the dubious distinction of being "scarcely the most absurd" of the writer's abundant output ("A Chapter on Autography" 214).

technically fraudulent, the fact of the letter containing all the information that contradicts his hypothesis being appended in a footnote bespeaks his fundamental honesty. Indeed, the writer's awkward, and sometimes amusing attempts at misdirection seem to me more suggestive of ingenuity than guile. A good illustration of this is his misrepresentation of the procedure employed by the medical friend to convey, by means of a "quill," some water to the stomach of the afflicted Tennent, who, after three days of inanimation, can be presumed to have been in a state of severe dehydration. Boudinot, as we have seen, places this occurrence at the beginning of Tennent's trance, thus directly contradicting the following passage of the letter, according to which this would have taken place immediately before Tennent's revival, and flatly denies the avowed purpose of the procedure:

He [the doctor friend] had discovered that the tongue was much swoln, and threatened to crack. He was endeavouring to soften it by some emollient ointment put upon it with a feather, when the brother came in (...), and mistaking what the doctor was doing for an attempt to feed him [Tennent], manifested some resentment, and said, in a spirited tone, 'It is shameful to be feeding a lifeless corpse.' (Boudinot, *Life* 14).

The physician would no doubt agree with this statement—he knew, of course, that he was providing much-needed nourishment to a living, albeit probably very enfeebled, person.

In retelling the story of the "resurrection" of William Tennent, Jr., the biographer appears to have kept all that was consistent with the spiritualist thesis, twisting or omitting all that was not. The end result, however, was far from convincing—even less convincing, let it be said to the writer's credit, than it would have been had the compromising letter been omitted. Writing in 1845, Archibald Alexander recognised the obvious fact that Tennent had been in what may be called a state of suspended animation, and that his friend had saved him from the ignorance of his brother:



It may be acknowledged, that some of the facts recorded in the preceding, are of a marvelous nature; but we are inclined to believe that they all may be accounted for on natural principles, except one.<sup>108</sup> The appearance of death, when life is not extinguished, but only suspended, has been often observed, on the termination of nervous fevers, and in epileptic and apoplectic. (...) Persons have been known to lie in one of these trances, for weeks together. And there is too much reason to fear, that many persons have been buried alive, by being prematurely carried to the grave. This undoubtedly would have been the unhappy case of Mr. Tennent, had not his young friend interposed. And as to the happy state of his mind, during this period, and his imagining that he was in heaven, it is all very natural, and does not require that we should suppose the soul to have been separated from the body. (...) in certain states of the nervous system, when the common functions of life seem to be suspended, it is no uncommon thing for the imagination to be strongly affected.

(*Biographical Sketches* 222-223 emphasis mine)

I am perfectly convinced that Poe deliberately alludes in “Ligeia” to this story, which I am sure he knew had had a tremendous impact on people like Col. Stone. The irony in this allusion is obvious. Even though his body was stiff, cold, and discolored as a corpse in the first stages of decomposition, Tennent’s heart was still beating. Boudinot appears to have altered the narrative so as to make it appear that Tennent’s heart had ceased to beat, and therefore that he had *really* been dead for three days, before reluctantly renewing his lease on life. The whole point of the alteration was to make the outcome of the story, Tennent’s final awakening to a long and healthy life, appear positively miraculous. For what had been, in his time, a technical knowledge possessed only by some particularly well-informed people, like the medical friend, had in the meantime become common knowledge: the absence of a heartbeat was a sure sign of death, whereas rigidity, low body

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108 This exception is a premonitory dream (see Alexander, *Biographical Sketches* 229-230).

temperature, and discoloration were not. This knowledge, of course, contributed to dispel the impression that death was not always irredeemable. Thus, what might, in less enlightened times, have been taken as a resurrection, became a cautionary tale illustrating the danger of premature burial, and this in despite of Boudinot's creative retelling of the facts.

The irony is that in the case of Rowena-Ligeia the impossible drama that appears to have been concocted by Boudinot *appears* to have actually taken place. The narrator mentions an intermittent heartbeat, and a cycle of reanimations and mortifications, both of which are, according to the accepted laws of nature, absolute impossibilities. Of course, the presumable aim of the alterations Boudinot made to the original tale was precisely that of forcing the reader to conclude that Tennent had been dead. However, since the facts reported by the biographer appear to have been a fabrication, we have to conclude instead, as Alexander did, that Tennent was in suspended animation. Conversely, the facts reported by the narrator of "Ligeia," inasmuch as there is a viable rational explanation for them that militates against the narrator's theory, appear not to have been fabricated and, therefore, we are forced to conclude that Rowena was dead, and remained dead throughout the whole scene, despite his claims to the effect that she had been hovering between life and death. Indeed, the possibility of a miracle is clearly discredited, as Poe himself pointed out, by the fact, recognized by the narrator himself, that *she* never came back to life. Moreover, while the fact that Tennent had a pulse had, according to the letter in the footnote, been noticed by two different witnesses, and then confirmed by the doctor's repeated examinations, Rowena's pulsation was *not* verified by external testimony. In fact, it was not even confirmed by the narrator's own examinations. From this, and from the impossibility of the supposed fact—an intermittent heartbeat—the narrator should have concluded he was deluded—that he was dreaming about the pulsation he had found on Ligeia's body, many days previously. In short, all the indications that suggest both that the return of Ligeia was an illusion and that Rowena was dead, inexorably lead to the conclusion that the narrator of the tale had attempted what Tennent's friend evidently did not, that is, to revive a

corpse. The ridicule reflects, of course, on Colonel Stone and Boudinot, who, in their eagerness to confirm their faith, had not been too scrupulous with their facts.

## 7 — The Vampire Motif in “Wake Not the Dead” and “Ligeia”

M. R. James (1862-1936), one of England’s foremost authors of ghost stories, once wrote: “It is not amiss sometimes to leave a loophole for a natural explanation, but, I would say, let the loophole be so narrow as not to be quite practicable” (qtd. in Tracy ix-x). He followed this maxim, which he derived from the practice of his avowed master, Poe’s contemporary Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873), in his own work. At least since the 1970s, most critics have assumed Poe had himself followed this rule. Thus, in a passage I have quoted earlier, G. R. Thompson declared “we cannot be sure of what did or did not take place” in “Ligeia,” and feels nothing at all may have actually happened outside the confines of the narrator’s restless mind (*Poe’s Fiction* 104). In *The Rationale of Deception in Poe* (1979), David Ketterer asserted that “the meaning of an arabesque tale,” like “Ligeia,” “can only be tentatively fixed within certain limits;” and that “[a]lmost all of” those tales “can be genuinely interpreted in a variety of ways” (181). Stuart and Susan F. Levine’s annotated edition of the tale reiterates this view: “Poe frequently provided readers with an alternative ‘rational’ way of accounting for the fantastic. In ‘Ligeia,’ the narrator’s ‘incipient madness’ and his addition to opium provide the needed margin of credibility: all that follows may be an illusion. Note, however, that madness and drugs are traditionally believed to be routes to transcendent truth. One chooses one’s own interpretation” (*Thirty-Two Stories* 62n9). But, why, may one ask, should that “rational” explanation be regarded as an “alternative;” and to what is it an alternative exactly?<sup>109</sup>

The terms employed by these writers can be misleading. What distinguishes the kind of supernatural tale that M. R. James wrote is not the possibility of “multiple interpretations.” All fiction, strictly speaking, admits many equally valid readings, but, in most cases, the events narrated are not at all dubious. Although the causes that determine it are a matter of speculation, the action of *Oedipus Rex*, for example, is not itself doubtful. In other words, any competent reader can produce

<sup>109</sup> To be fair, the Levines provide a straight, albeit, in my opinion, unsatisfactory answer to such questions, and one which is implied in Thompson’s, Wilbur’s, and Winters’s readings of the tale: “In each story, a visionary sees the underlying truths of the universe” (*Thirty-Two Stories* 54).

a straightforward synopsis of the tragedy on the main points of which, at least, all other readers must agree. On the other hand, a consensus will never be reached on the *meaning* of the tragedy. What distinguishes tales like Le Fanu's "The Familiar" from *Oedipus Rex*, then, is that in the former the action is itself a matter of speculation. In that tale, two distinct interpretations of the action cohabit, the natural and the supernatural, none of which fits *all* the facts, and most critics agree that this is also the case with "Ligeia." In other words, the predominant view today in Poe studies is that "Ligeia" is a tale with a loophole.

But I have been trying to show that the "hole" in the narrator's "thesis" is not nearly as narrow as James recommended, and Thompson and Ketterer thought. There is, in fact, a huge gaping crater in the narrator's thesis, but being camouflaged by a thick layer of misleading mystical jargon, the hole goes almost unnoticed on a first reading. Nevertheless, it is there, *in* the surface, poised to swallow the apparent story. Indeed, as one pursues the many avenues of inquiry suggested by the text, the evidence for a supernatural explanation itself contracts into an increasingly narrow loophole, which eventually gets too narrow to be practicable. The accumulated evidence that shows that the narrator misinterpreted the evidence in light of his superstition and ignorance, although cunningly disguised, is too compelling to dismiss. Therefore, instead of a delicate balance between natural and supernatural explanations and one indeterminate story, we end up with two different stories: one supernatural, the other natural. The former, since it depends on all the narrator's blunders, is demonstrably false; the latter, being based on the probable, indeed obvious interpretation of the facts, is true. "Ligeia," and the other tales we have looked at, are, therefore, not supernatural tales, but tales of ratiocination. In the limited sense that they are designed to trick the reader into thinking some supernatural agency is involved, they are, of course, supernatural tales—as such, they exerted great influence over future writers of supernatural horror thrillers. Poe certainly knew how most effectively to scare readers out of their wits, so to speak. But his ability to mystify readers was even more remarkable.

The false, supernatural story in “Ligeia” seems to be as much a combination of ideas Poe picked up from obscure sources as the true one. In the previous section we have seen how Poe’s “drama of revivification” was probably inspired by a fraudulent retelling of the extraordinary revival of William Tennent, Jr. (Poe, “Ligeia” 328). In Poe’s complicated design, this became a cloak for the true story of Ligeia’s reanimation, which in turn appears to have been inspired by the crypt scene in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*. In this section I will look at the probable source of other aspect of the false story: the vampire motif.

Ligeia apparently returned to assume the degrading role of a “patsy for murder,” as Susan Amper puts it (“Masters of Deceit” 142). Indeed, the narrator “dreams,” as it were, that his entombed wife came back from the grave to get rid of her successor. But what exactly was the returned Ligeia? This is one of the most perplexing aspects of the story. This supernatural murderess appears to be a bizarre cross between a ghost and a revenant, or vampire. As usual, however, the impression can be decomposed. Analysis of the tale shows that the Ligeia that appeared in Rowena’s room belongs to an illustrious line of accusing ghosts that goes back to Banquo, and beyond, and the direct inspiration for which probably came from the femicide stories by Dickens and Macnish, and the ghost of the murdered Elvira in *The Monk*—this was the truth about the apparition. Yet, this is not how the narrator perceives it, hence the confusion. He believes he inadvertently raised his sorceress wife from the dead, and that she got rid of his second wife so she could take, if only temporarily, her place.

From a genetic standpoint, the figure in Rowena’s room was, I believe, both a ghost and a revenant, in the sense that Poe had borrowed the motif of the vampire wife from yet another rather obscure source, the tale “Wake Not the Dead,” included in the 1823 collection *Popular Tales and Romances of the Northern Nations*. Paul Lewis first pointed out the resemblance between the two tales in 1979, in his article “The Intellectual Functions of Gothic Fiction: Poe’s ‘Ligeia’ and Tieck’s ‘Wake Not the Dead’” (1979). As his title indicates, Lewis attributed the latter tale to the German

Romantic poet Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853). This is an unambiguously supernatural story, with no loophole, about a man who cannot stand his fair-haired second wife and is possessed with an unholy desire for his raven-haired first wife, whom he eventually summons from the grave with the aid of a mysterious sorcerer. Upon her return, the dark Lady banishes her successor, and temporarily resumes her former position, with tragic consequences. This is, more or less, what the narrator of “Ligeia” thinks happened to him, with only one important difference: he believes Ligeia gave his wife Rowena some drops that hastened her death—this idea, I believe, came from yet another obscure source I will discuss in the next section.

In his article, Paul Lewis points out only the general resemblance, and offers very little in the way of actual comparison between the texts of the two tales:

Both [stories] deal with a man’s conflict between morality and passion, spiritual study and mundane concerns, summarized in both by the choice between a fair and a dark woman. In both the man chooses, even after the dark beauty has died, to revive, at any cost, the dead lover and teacher. Both men are reduced to near madness and trance-like mental states by their association with the undead. The correspondence of several minor details—e.g., the redecoration of the bedrooms, the hair colors of the two women, and the first wives’ peculiar combination of metaphysics and desire—suggest Poe’s familiarity with Tieck’s tale. (“Intellectual Functions” 216)

Later, in 1995, Thomas S. Hansen and Burton R. Pollin attempted the first systematic study of the influence of German literature on Poe in *The German Face of Edgar Allan Poe*. In my opinion, their book settled the dispute concerning Poe’s ability to read German literature in the original by demonstrating conclusively that his references to German authors are either vague, and second-hand, or to texts he could have read in translation. Aside from such references, Poe evinces nothing but the most rudimentary knowledge of the language.<sup>110</sup> As regards Tieck, specifically,

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<sup>110</sup> Mabbott, in a section of the introduction to his edition of the tales entitled “Foreign Influences,” had already stated that Poe’s knowledge of German was, contrary to what had been asserted by previous scholars, probably very basic: “Poe’s German was self-taught, a bilingual book by Sarah Austin was his primer, and there is no evidence that he

whom Lewis regarded as the author of “Wake Not the Dead,” Hansen and Pollin remarked that: “Readers had long been struck by apparent similarities” between some of his tales and poems and Poe’s, “but have never been able to make an iron-clad case for actual influence” (*German Face* 95).

In a cursory reference to Lewis’s article, however, Hansen and Pollin sustain that, from all the critics who had dealt with the issue, he had come closest to making such a case, by finding “strong affinities that suggest Tieck’s ‘Wake Not the Dead’ as a plausible source for Poe’s ‘Ligeia,’” which, nevertheless, they feel were not wholly conclusive:

As Lewis points out, many details are standard conventions of the Gothic fantastic. Still one cannot help being struck by the basic situation in the two tales, in which a husband mourns for a dark-haired, passionate, intellectual wife, but finally replaces her with a fair-haired, less exceptional one. More striking is the fact that he redecorates their bedroom with new draperies, which in “Ligeia” are a central atmospheric detail. This use of draperies suggests a knowledge of Tieck’s text—though such an atmospheric touch may be Poe’s invention. With the aid of necromancy Tieck’s protagonist brings the former wife back from the grave, whereupon her vampirism spreads death. (*German Face* 96)

I have to agree with Hansen and Pollin that the evidence outlined in the previous quotations is not decisive. But they too limit themselves to outlining the resemblance of what they term the “basic situation.” A much stronger case for influence can be made if one takes into account the many verbal parallelisms between “Wake Not the Dead” and “Ligeia,” which they and Lewis have overlooked for reasons that are easy to understand. These critics were not specifically interested in the English text, which both regarded as a translation, but in discussing the possibility of Poe’s direct acquaintance with German originals. Lewis assumed Poe’s acquaintance with a German

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progressed beyond it. He could find and copy out a passage from Humboldt’s *Kosmos*, of which an English version was before him, and probably could have read a simple German text by the aid of a dictionary, but that he ever read three consecutive pages of German is to be doubted” (*Tales* 1:xxiii). Despite this, many critics continued to assume Poe could read German texts in the original until Hansen and Pollin published their book, which seems to have put an end to the question.



original, and, therefore, presumably thought the comparison between the English text of the tale and Poe's would be pointless. Pollin and Hansen, on the other hand, were trying to show that Poe could not read German. The very existence of an English text proved their point: Poe's acquaintance with the tale, although probable, did not prove he read German.

But neither Lewis nor Hansen and Pollin provide the publishing details of the supposed German original, or even its title. Indeed, the attribution of the authorship of "Wake Not the Dead" to Tieck appears to be wholly conjectural. The anthology where the English text appeared, *Popular Tales and Romances of the Northern Nations*, although purporting to be a collection of translations from the German—which, for the most part, it was—did not include author names for any of the tales. Patrick Bridgwater, in *The German Gothic-Novel in Anglo-German Perspective*, has recently pointed out that there is no hard evidence connecting Tieck, or any other German author, to "Wake Not the Dead:"

No German original has been found. Tieck's authorship having been disputed, Ernst Raupach was put forward as author of the tale, presumably on the strength of his comedy *Laßt die Toten ruhen!* (1826), which, whatever else it is, is clearly not the original of *Wake Not the Dead*. (...) My own view is that *Wake Not the Dead* is not by Tieck, and that it is most likely not a translation at all, just one of the many early Gothic tales masquerading as "From the German." (240-41)

Although Poe himself may have believed it a translation, until the hypothetical original of "Wake Not the Dead" is produced, the tale cannot be admitted as evidence of Poe's acquaintance with German literature, though it certainly reiterates that the kind of horror tales he wrote were associated by his contemporaries with Germany. The evidence that establishes it as source of "Ligeia," on the other hand, appears to me quite irrefutable. Poe seems to have adapted not only part of the plot of "Wake Not the Dead" for his tale, but even whole passages of its text. The protagonist of that tale is a "powerful lord of Burgundy" by the name of Walter, who remains

obsessed with his dead first wife, the demonic Brunhilda, even after marrying the chaste, angel-like Swanhilda. In the opening lines of the tale, we find Walter expressing his forbidden desire for the dead: “Wilt thou for ever sleep? wilt thou never more awake, my beloved? but henceforth repose for ever from thy short pilgrimage on earth? O yet once again return!” (“Wake Not the Dead” 233-34). Poe’s narrator, of course, also hoped he “could restore” Ligeia “to the pathway she had abandoned —ah, *could* it be forever?—upon the earth” (Poe, “Ligeia” 323). The parallelism is, I think, quite evident.

This parallelism extends to the physical description of Brunhilda, whose “tresses” were “dark as the raven face of midnight” (“Wake Not” 235). This phrase evidently provided the model for the “the raven-black, the glossy, the luxuriant and naturally curling tresses, setting forth the full force of the Homeric epithet, ‘hyacinthine!’” of Ligeia (“Ligeia” 312 emphasis mine). Discounting the excessive profusion of adjectives, and the high-flown scholarly allusion, both of which reflect the tastes of Poe’s pretentious narrator, we find the same idea expressed in the same words: both women had “raven tresses.” Incidentally, in the last paragraph of the tale, Poe reinforces the parallelism by comparing Ligeia’s hair with “*the wings of the midnight*” (“Ligeia” 330 emphasis mine). Thus, all the key elements of the phrase which denotes Brunhilda’s “tresses” are applied, in Poe’s tale, to Ligeia’s. This scattered allusion, and many others like it, added to the basic resemblance of the apparent story, make it impossible to believe, I think, that this was anything but a voluntary borrowing. And there are many other such coincidences between the two tales.

Ligeia, then, whose role corresponds, in the structure of the tale, to Brunhilda’s, resembles her also in being black-haired. Likewise, Swanhilda, Walter’s second wife, is blonde like Rowena: “Her golden locks waved bright as the beams of morn” (“Wake Not” 236). Thus, one would expect a more or less direct correspondence between the pair Ligeia-Rowena and Brunhilda-Swanhilda. Paul Lewis, as we have seen, certainly suggests this correspondence. But the resemblances between the women in the tales often escape this neat pattern. Ligeia’s mysterious eyes, for example are

exactly what the eyes of Brunhilda are said *not* to be: “her eyes did not resemble those burning orbs whose pale glow gem the vault of the night, and whose immeasurable distance fills the soul with deep thoughts of eternity, but rather as the sober beams which cheer this nether world, and which, while they enlighten, kindle the sons of earth to joy and love” (“Wake Not” 235). Ligeia’s “orbs” “became to me,” her husband admits, “the twin stars of Leda, and I to them the devoutest of astrologers;” at the end of the following paragraph, he follows this astronomical metaphor with an actual astronomical analogue of Ligeia’s eyes: “there are one or two stars in heaven—(one especially, a star of the sixth magnitude, double and changeable, to be found near the large star in Lyra) in a telescopic scrutiny of which I have been made aware of the feeling” inspired by the dead wife’s eyes (Poe, “Ligeia” 312, 314).

Technically, in astronomy, magnitude is a measure of brightness; the sixth magnitude corresponding to the least luminous stars that can be distinguished by the naked eye. There being a strong correlation between brightness and distance, Poe’s passage reinforces, in practice, the idea of “immeasurable distance” we find in “Wake Not the Dead,” which is underlined by the reference to “telescopic scrutiny.” The point of the original metaphor, of course, was that of comparing the luminosity, or more precisely the heat, of more distant stars with that of the sun, whose relative brightness, owing to its proximity to the Earth, is many times greater than that of even stars of the first magnitude, the brightest in the night sky. Once again, we find the same metaphor that had been used to qualify the physical portrait of the beloved late wife in “Wake Not the Dead” serving the same purpose in “Ligeia.” This time, the image is not only greatly amplified in Poe’s tale, and accompanied by the usual displays of reading, but the idea itself—the coldness of distant stars—is greatly exaggerated. The most significant difference, however, is that Ligeia appears on the cold side of the comparison.

Although she resembled Ligeia in so many other things, the eyes of the “passionate” Brunhilda were not cold and distant, but hot like the nearest star which daily “kindles” men to “joy

and love.” The narrator of Poe’s tale, of course, cannot understand why that exceedingly dim star in the constellation of Lyra reminded him of Ligeia’s eyes. But the author of “Wake Not the Dead,” whoever he may be, does not, like Poe, leave the task of decoding his astronomical allegory to the reader. He means that Brunhilda was a fiery lover. After the wedding, she and Walter “abandoned themselves to the enjoyment of a passion that rendered them reckless of aught besides;” it was “a delirium which they prayed might continue for ever;” it was “phrenzied passion” (“Wake Not” 236). Such “reckless” loving, the tale implied, is not healthy. After a while, Brunhilda, apparently succumbs to an over-active sex life, and dies childless.

The comparison between the sun and the more distant stars in the initial description of Brunhilda foreshadows the contrast between her and the chaste Swanhilda, Walter’s second wife, as those distant stars are later used, precisely, as an analogue of the latter’s eyes: “her limbs were proportioned in the nicest symmetry, yet did they not possess that [Brunhilda’s] luxuriant fullness of animal life: her eye beamed eloquently, but it was with the milder radiance of a star tranquilizing to tenderness rather than exciting to warmth. Thus formed, it was not possible that she should steep him [Walter] in his former delirium” (“Wake Not” 236-237). Ligeia may have inherited Brunhilda’s “raven tresses,” but she has Swanhilda’s cold and eloquent eye.

In “Wake Not the Dead” stargazing is an explicit metaphor of sexual abstinence. As usual, in “Ligeia” the image becomes a mystery. But, although the narrator seems unaware of this, his comparison also implies the idea of frigidity. Evidently, only on the point of death did Ligeia satisfy his desire. Her husband admits, however that, in the last period of their marriage, the “radiant lustre of her eyes” was wanting (Poe “Ligeia” 316). He also speaks at length of their “expression.” This word conveys the same idea that is attached in “Wake Not the Dead” to the adjective “eloquent.” These women’s eyes spoke to their husbands.

The idea, of course, is that through their disinterest in sensual fruition, these women purified, as it were, their husband’s base earthly passions. Again, this is made quite explicit by the

astronomical image in “Wake Not the Dead.” While the fiery eyes of Brunhilda inflamed Walter’s passions, making him forget all but his present sensuous enjoyment, the star-like eyes of Swanhilda exerted a “tranquilising” influence; the distant stars to which her eyes are now likened had, previously in the tale, in the passage that described Brunhilda’s eyes, been said to fill “the soul with deep thoughts of eternity.” Thus, Swanhilda led him onward to a spiritual ecstasy, which was continually deferred. The narrator of “Ligeia,” of course, suggests Ligeia’s eyes had the same effect on him. In referring their wizard power to their “expression,” he remarks, as we have seen, this was a word “behind whose vast latitude of mere sound we intrench our ignorance of so much of the spiritual” (Poe, “Ligeia” 313).

Another trait Ligeia and Swanhilda have in common is that they appear themselves wholly aloof from sensuous passions, and subject only to spiritual enthusiasms. Thus, “only when excited by some emotion of her soul did a rosy hue tinge the lily paleness of” Swanhilda’s “cheek” (“Wake not” 236 emphasis mine). Likewise, Ligeia was “outwardly calm” and “ever-placid,” except when, in rare “moments of intense excitement,” her appearance, and her eyes especially, were transfigured in a way that suggested to the narrator “the beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth” (Poe, “Ligeia” 313). Thus, for once, Poe is more explicit than his original: the dehumanising tendency of Swanhilda’s portrait becomes explicit in his treatment of Ligeia. But spiritual enthusiasm was not at all what the men in these tales demanded of a wife. Walter ends up divorcing his starry-eyed second wife Swanhilda, returning her to her parents’ house, alleging that “her cold disposition, bordering upon indifference, but ill assorted with his ardent temperament” (“Wake Not” 255). Evidently, the lack of “ordinary passion” in “Ligeia” was equally displeasing to her husband, who we have good reason to surmise has taken more energetic measures to get rid of her. At the same time, he indirectly confirms the suspicion that he had raped her, for, even at the point of death, when she supposedly manifested her “love” for him, her eyes remained cold and spiritual—in fact, they were even colder than usual, which strongly suggests he was thinking about the *dead* Ligeia.

This ultimately disturbs the neat identification of Ligeia and Rowena with “passion” and “morality,” respectively, which Paul Lewis took for granted. Indeed, this kind of identification is as impracticable in “Ligeia” as it is inescapable in “Wake not the Dead.” There is no indication that her husband found Rowena any more passionate, in the “ordinary” way, than Ligeia. He liked them both better after they were dead. Thus, none of the wives in Poe’s tale conforms to any of the unrealistic stereotypes represented by Brunhilda and Swanhilda. I suspect this was the point of Poe’s imitation.

The two wives in “Wake Not the Dead” represent the opposite poles of the phallo-centric sentimental view of women which the femicide story indirectly exposes as a form of misogynous aggression. One might argue that Walter’s two wives are not really women, but rather symbols, or allegories, respectively, of pleasure and morality. The demon-woman Brunhilda represents the pursuit of sensuous gratification as an end in itself, which is quite explicitly associated with death and sterility; the pure, virtually fleshless, and angel-like Swanhilda represents, through the stereotype of the virgin-mother, the domestication of male sexual instinct, which, through her chastening influence, is curbed and channeled to the culturally accepted end of procreation, and otherwise repressed, and sublimated into a sort of spiritual enthusiasm.

Swanhilda significantly bears Walter two children, a boy and a girl, which later fall prey to Brunhilda’s vampirism. For, after returning from the grave, she needed the blood of vigorous youths to “animate the dull current in her veins and awaken the glow of life and the flame of love” (“Wake Not” 281). As a last resort after all young people had either died or fled from the region, she fed on Walter himself, who was already much enfeebled when he finally became wise to her. The tale thus demonises female sexual pleasure in a way that is typical of the patriarchal discourse of the time. Indeed, Brunhilda’s sexual initiative is, at least in part, what makes her a monster, according to the implied moral of the tale. She thus represents the male dread of the sexually active woman, expressed by the anxiety that she might consume her lover’s vigour and rob him of his virility, and

even of his life. But even then, she is not a real woman, but a projection of male lust. When Walter accuses her of killing his children, she retorts: “I was obliged to pamper myself with warm youthful blood, in order that I might satisfy thy furious desires—thou art the murderer” (273). Later, Walter assumes the guilt: “Murderer of thy own offspring,” he calls himself (277). Swanhilda, on the other hand, is sexually passive. While she does not exactly oppose her husband’s desires, she keeps them in check by means of her awful modesty. She thus matches the conventional representations of the model wife in the literature of the time.

Necrophilia is the explicit theme of “Wake Not the Dead,” as Brunhilda herself makes clear when she tells Walter that he had had “the courage to love the dead—to take into thy bed, one who had been sleeping in the grave, the bed-fellow of the worm,” and to “clasp in” his “lustful arms the corruption of the tomb” (“Wake Not” 273). But this necrophilia is allegorical, not actual, and subjected to a moral which can be rendered thus: “The man who devotes himself entirely to satisfy his sexual urges, ignoring morality, consorts with death.”

At first sight, Poe’s tale appears to be a retelling of the same male story. Aspasia Stephanou as recently presented a reading of “Ligeia” as a typical tale of vampirism in “Lovely Apparitions and Spiritualized Corpses:”

evil is materialized as the vampire Ligeia. The struggle [Ligeia’s struggle, that is] is that between life and death, a weak and a strong will, and evil and good.

Poe’s response to the question of womanhood can be read through his treatment of philosophical ideas circulating in antebellum America. In his stories, vampirism and disease are dramatized through the tension between mind and body, masculine and feminine, life and death. There is an urge for metaphysical union that is disrupted by the horror of woman’s evil spirit. The horror of Poe’s vampire stories arises from the tension between metaphysics and sexual difference, between the desire to synthesize dualisms into an absolute identity and their disruption by the

fleshy materiality of monstrous femininity and her dangerous persistence to transcend God's will. (45).

Thus, Ligeia "fanatical spirit" is regarded as evil (Stephanou, "Lovely Apparitions" 44). Stephanou concludes that tales like "Ligeia" directly express the anxieties of the author which, like Gilbert and Gubar, she regards as the typical male of the culture in which he was inserted:

Southern belles are transformed into southern vampires, but such monsters remain other to patriarchal structures. Woman's otherness is written on her body and mind. Her vampirism and consumptive disease, evident through her physical disintegration and her satanic mind, are part of her personal identity, and thus simultaneously material and spiritual. Woman's horror, like that of Poe's tales, is that of the perfect synthesis, of the luciferian wedding of matter and spirit.

(51)

This, of course, accurately captures the spirit in which the narrator writes his tale. Indeed, this interpretation of the typical male story of female vampirism perfectly fits "Wake Not the Dead," and this is its greatest limitation. For Poe completely subverts the ideology that is inherent to the tale from which he borrowed the vampire motif. In "Ligeia," the contrasting stereotypes of the angel- and demon-woman are exploded by being projected simultaneously on the same character. This, of course, has always been one of the chief causes of perplexity before Poe's tale: Ligeia appears an angel and a demon both at once. In the end, however, we must conclude she was neither: she was *merely* a woman, no more, and no less.<sup>111</sup>

We have already seen that Swanhilda's cold eyes represented her sexual passivity. Ligeia's eyes, of course, were even colder. By crossing the broken threads of relevant information, as we

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<sup>111</sup> In this respect, the apparent inconsistency of Ligeia's character is foreshadowed by Matilda in Lewis's *The Monk*. Louis F. Peck remarks, indeed, that the latter is not "consistently diabolical. (...) The suggestion has been advanced that Lewis changed his mind in the course of the narrative, conceiving her first as a human maiden torn with desire and later as a succubus; but it seems clear that the author, though he fell into inconsistencies which could easily have been removed, had determined upon her evil nature from the start" (*A Life* 39). Unlike Peck, however, I believe the inconsistency was not the result of oversight, but integral to Lewis's subversive design.



have seen, we are brought to the conclusion that her eyes became cold and expressive only at the point of death. Thus, Poe suggests that the ideal of the passive sexual partner that the author of “Wake Not the Dead” had projected on Swanhilda can only be met, in reality, by a dead woman. Thus, the metaphoric necrophilia of that tale becomes literal, albeit encrypted, in “Ligeia.” This is, to be sure, horrible stuff. But Poe does not merely borrow from “Wake Not the Dead;” he alludes to it in a way that suggests that the implications of the view of sexuality that pervades that tale are no less disturbing than his narrator’s behaviour. In fact, he suggests a fundamental affinity exists between the two.

And this is where the real subversion begins. The same ideology that informs “Wake Not the Dead” is projected on Poe’s corpse-loving narrator, but in a context where the expectations that flow from that ideology clash with a female figure that does not correspond to any of the stereotypes according to which women were conventionally perceived. Thus, Poe suggests—as he does again and again in this tale, in many different ways—that such male expectations, since they must eventually clash with reality, inexorably promote a morbid fascination with dead women. This fascination, of course, is not a wild theoretical possibility. It was a very real cultural phenomenon in the Romantic age.

This is illustrated by an anecdote reported by Gilbert and Gubar:

In 1869, to retrieve a poetry manuscript he had sentimentally buried with this beloved woman whose face ‘fill[ed] his dreams’—buried as if woman and artwork were necessarily inseparable--[Dante Gabriel] Rossetti had [his wife] Lizzie’s coffin exhumed, and literary London buzzed with rumors that her hair had ‘continued to grow after her death, to grow so long, so beautiful, so luxuriantly as to fill the coffin with its gold.’ As if symbolizing the indomitable earthliness that no woman, however angelic, could entirely renounce, Lizzie Siddal Rossetti’s hair leaps like a metaphor

for monstrous female sexual energies from the literal and figurative coffins in which her artist-husband enclosed her. (*Madwoman* 27)

Such stories were very common in that period, both before and after Poe.<sup>112</sup> In fact, Ellen Weinauer has recently shown that Poe's later tale "The Oblong Box" is probably a satire directed at Rufus Griswold who in November 1842, "about a month" after his wife's death, "undertook an action that is worthy of one of Poe's bereaved husbands: he went to Green Wood Cemetery, where Carolina [Griswold] was interred, opened the burial vault, and embraced her decaying corpse," an episode he himself narrates in a letter ("Undead Wives" 183). Such episodes express perfectly the extreme patriarchal outlook that characterises the femicide character. Commenting on the first of these episodes, and on Rossetti's appropriation of his wife's memory, Gilbert and Gubar remark:

If we define a woman like Rossetti's dead wife as indomitably earthly yet somehow supernatural, we are defining her as a witch or monster, a magical creature of the lower world who is a kind of antithetical mirror image of an angel. As such, she still stands, in Sherry Ortner's words, 'both under and over (but really simply outside of) the sphere of culture's hegemony.' But now, as a representative of otherness, she incarnates the damning otherness of the flesh rather than the inspiring otherness of the spirit, expressing what—to use Anne Finch's words—men consider her own 'presumptuous' desires rather than the angelic humility and 'dullness' for which she was designed. Indeed, if we return to the literary definitions of authority with which we began this discussion, we will see that the monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author's power to allay 'his' anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch,

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<sup>112</sup> Novalis is perhaps the most emblematic example of the sometimes morbid idealisation of a sexless romantic partner in which certain Romantic partners engaged. According to some reports: "La morte est sans cesse présente à sa pensée; un jour, il croit la voir assise auprès de lui sur un canapé, la tête tournée de profil, avec le châle vert qu'elle portait dans sa dernière maladie. Ou bien il organise, avec des vêtements de Sophie et des objets familiers, une sorte de mise en scène dont il espère un miracle, la présence vraie. Surtout il y a la vision du 13 mai, sur la tombe: 'Le soir, j'allai voir Sophie. Moments d'enthousiasme foudroyants. D'un souffle, je dissipai la tombe comme un tas de poussière—les siècles ne semblaient plus que des instants—sa présence me devenait sensible—il me semblait qu'elle était sur le point d'apparaître'" (Bianquis, *Avant-propos* 16).

bitch, fiend, monster) and, simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained 'place' and thus generates a story that 'gets away' from its author. (27-28)

I am convinced this was precisely the point Poe was trying to make—not overtly, of course, but by presenting outrageously exaggerated versions of the typical male story in which he defied the pervasive myths of femaleness which “Wake Not the Dead” presented to the reader in all seriousness. Of course, that tale, like all Gothic stories, even the tamest, itself contains an element of subversion. In “Wake Not the Dead” the stereotypes of the demon and the angel are mostly unscathed, and are only slightly undermined by the repulsiveness of the protagonist. In Poe’s tale, on the other hand, they are brought to a crisis.

And the similarities between the two stories do not stop here, for Brunhilda resembled Ligeia much more after Walter had raised her from the dead than she had in her natural life. To his dismay, he found she was not quite as hot-blooded as she once had been. In addition, she looked too pallid and death-like for his taste. For a fortnight afterwards a “shudder (...) would not permit him to touch her” (“Wake Not” 250). Yet, although she looked dead, Walter found her more desirable and fascinating than ever, and quickly overcame his repulsion. But Brunhilda was not herself. In life, the dark lady had been a pleaser; the pale revenant, however, was a teaser:

Never till now had her voice sounded which such tones of sweetness; never before did her language possess such eloquence as it now did, when she conversed with him on the subject of the past. (...) And, while she thus vividly portrayed their hours of past delight, she delineated in still more glowing, more enchanting colours, those hours of approaching bliss which now awaited them, richer in enjoyment than any preceding ones. In this manner did she charm her attentive auditor with enrapturing hopes for the future, and lull him in dreams of more than mortal ecstasy.

(“Wake not” 250-51)

According to her husband, of course, Ligeia suffered a similar change, which took place, however, not after, but immediately *before* her death. During that period, he tells us he “hearkened, entranced, to a melody more than moral—to assumptions and aspirations which mortality had never before known,” a phrase which is a clear paraphrase of the last sentence in the passage transcribed above (Poe, “Ligeia” 317). This strengthens the parallel between the *live* Ligeia and the undead Brunhilda. They both excited their husband’s desire, but deferred its satisfaction by repulsing his advances. The vampire, who was no longer capable of real passion, was cunningly manipulating Walter. Indeed, she puts a price on her body: the repudiation of Swanhilda. After this condition is met, she became an even more fiery lover than her former self had ever been—fierier, the text suggests, than any *live* woman could be. But, even then, “she would continually discourse with him on the bliss experienced by happy beings beyond the grave, assuring him that, as his affection had recalled her from the tomb, they were now irrevocably united” (“Wake Not” 265).

It would seem, then, that Brunhilda was imparting to her husband the same forbidden knowledge that the narrator of Poe’s tale suggests Ligeia was imparting to him. But we find here the same pattern of repetition and variation that characterises all of Poe’s borrowings. Brunhilda became her husband’s teacher only after she died, whereas Ligeia had always, even in her prime, been her husband’s teacher; more importantly, the latter, unlike the former, had never in her life expressed the “ordinary passion” that her husband expected. This significant inversion of the pattern hints at another, decisive difference between the two tales.

In her eloquence, the dead-alive Brunhilda resembles Ligeia in the period in which her husband “saw that she must die” (Poe, “Ligeia” 316). At length, Walter comes to the same conclusion—that he would have to shut his ears to his wife’s promises of eternal bliss and kill her. The sorcerer who had shown him how to bring his dead wife back from the dead, now instructs Walter to stab her to the heart—this was the only way to dispose of the undead. As he did so, she

opened her eyes and told him “in a hollow dying accent:” “Thou too art doomed to perdition” (“Wake Not” 283).

Walter, however, did not exactly kill a woman—he killed a foul monster, which was already dead. In another sense, he destroys the symbol of his forbidden lust. Nevertheless, he experiences the pangs of a guilty conscience. Brunhilda’s “image continually haunted Walter’s imagination, so that his existence was one continued martyrdom;” often did he recall “her expiring words, and, appalled at their terrific import, imagined that the doom of his perdition was irrecoverably passed” (“Wake Not” 264-65). Poe’s narrator was avowedly afflicted by the same tell-tale symptoms of guilt: the image of his dying wife, and her expiring words. As we have seen, although he “would not wish to dwell on the wild meaning” of some of the words she addressed to him at the time, he remembers vividly the words that she uttered with “her last sighs,” which he identifies as “the concluding words of the passage in Glanvill” (Poe, “Ligeia” 319). This too appears to be a mistake. Most likely, she was cursing him, only not as explicitly as she presumably had done with those words he preferred not to transcribe. The parallelism indicates, once again, that the narrator of Poe’s tale had killed his first wife, like Walter had killed his. As usual, however, the differences are as significant as the similarities. Evidently, Poe’s narrator had not killed a vampire—he had killed a woman.

We keep finding the deep “mysteries” of “Ligeia” explained in Poe’s sources. But there is always a difference. In this case, the solution which is handed to the reader of the unquestionably supernatural original tale actually invalidates the supernatural reading of “Ligeia.” Walter was haunted because he had killed his dead-alive wife; in “Ligeia,” the ghost of the murdered first wife is merely confused with a revenant. This is the perfect illustration of Poe’s “chemistry of the intellect.” His composition is oriented towards an effect that is radically different from the one the author he plundered intended to achieve. Indeed, Poe deliberately appropriated and subverted all the sensationalist literature that preceded him to produce something new. This, of course, my reader

may reply, is what all good writers do. What distinguishes Poe, however, is the cool, undaunted deliberateness of his approach, as well as the complete, uncompromising rejection of the moral and aesthetical codes of his time.

## 8 — “The Somnambulist:” Another Source of “Ligeia”

Although it is probably not the genuine article, “Wake Not the Dead” is certainly patterned after a kind of supernatural tale that writers of the second generation of German Romanticism, like Hoffmann, Tieck, and Chamisso, had brought into fashion. These were modern fairy tales which reflected a new-found interest in “folklore.” They were unambiguously set in a world where fairies, witches, vampires, and other mythological figures derived from ancient pagan beliefs are real. In his time, Glanvill could still sustain the reality of such beings without attracting universal ridicule. By the late eighteenth-century, however, this was no longer a tenable position. It was then understood that the supernatural was not literal, but figurative, and that it expressed obscurely intuited truths about human nature—thus understood, the fairy tale was a natural choice for Romantic literateurs, inasmuch as it lent itself for symbolical interpretations. Of course, the supernatural was already a metaphor in Perrault’s fables, but the reader was there provided with the key to the allegory. In the new style of fairy tale pioneered by the German Romantics, supernatural motifs became rather symbols, expressing insights into subterranean aspects of human psychology, which the reader was invited to sound.

Chamisso’s “Peter Schlemihl” is a good example of the way the supernatural can be used as an inducement to analogical thinking. People in the real world do not just lose their shadows—on this everyone can be supposed to agree. Therefore, the reader surmises the tale is a reflection on personal identity, the meaning of which must be tentatively fixed by symbolism. Likewise, in “Wake Not the Dead,” we know that Walter *really* raised his first wife from the dead. Since it is understood that this is impossible, all that is left for the reader to do is to figure out what this means. We assume, that is, that vampires like Brunhilda do not exist. We presuppose, at least, that the author did not expect his reader to believe such things were possible. Thus, she and Swanhilda are allowed to stand as personifications respectively, of virtue and vice, intemperance and chastity. The

symbolism also easily lends itself to a psychological interpretation, with Walter's two wives representing opposing aspects of the human mind, the rational and what would later be termed the subconscious. The same assumption is usually made with regard to "Ligeia." According to Richard Wilbur's influential reading of the tale, the title-character represents the narrator's "psyche" (see Wilbur, *Complete Poems* 16).

But the doubt that surrounds the supernatural events in Poe's tale disturbs such readings. For example, in Poe's "A Decided Loss" (1835) the original version of "Loss of Breath," which I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, the narrator's inability to breathe is clearly a metaphor for sexual impotence. The narrator, of course, believes that he did, in actual fact, lose his voice. Certain signs, however, suggest that he may have been merely afflicted by the condition of which this appears to be the metaphor. In fact, he appears not to be aware of the metaphor. "I had heard of Peter Schlemil," he tells us, "but I did not believe in him until now" (Poe, "A Decided Loss" 54). Through this allusion, Poe emphasised the crucial difference between his tale and Chamisso's, while also suggesting that his narrator was too literal-minded and, indeed, that his compulsion to take the metaphor literally manifested his inability to acknowledge the true nature of his problem. Thus, the tale can be read as a study in abnormal psychology. The comparison between "Ligeia" and "Peter Schlemihl" is equally revealing. The latter recounts the story of a man who lost his shadow; the former deals with a man who does not recognise his own shadow, a mistake which signals to the reader that he had completely misrepresented himself. Again, the emphasis is shifted from facts to beliefs, and the metaphor made literal for the purpose of emphasising an underlying psychiatric imbalance.

Thus, what was, in the typical German modern fairy tale, unquestionable, although incredible, is made doubtful in Poe's tale—so doubtful, indeed, that it must ultimately be rejected as an illusion *of the narrator*. The same applies to Poe's borrowings from tales that had no hint of the supernatural, either actual or explained, about them. The narrator believes, as we have seen, that his



first wife, Ligeia, appeared in the bedroom of his second wife, Rowena, then in the throes of a illness that threatened her life, and poisoned her wine, thus causing, or at least ensuring her death—for, whatever other properties the drops appeared to have, he is certain that they caused Rowena’s apparent death. This is something that Poe did not find in *The Monk*, *The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide*, or any of the other stories from which he appears to have drawn inspiration for his tale.

He seems to have picked this very distinctive idea from yet another exceedingly obscure source, and one which has become even more so since Poe’s day, a short story entitled “The Somnambulist,” first published in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* in February 1838, which did not identify its author. It was the first, and apparently the only instalment of a series entitled *Extracts from the Memorandum Book of the Late Pastor of St. Leonard’s*.<sup>113</sup> *Tait’s* was one of the leading English magazines of the time, and one on which Poe was likely to keep a close look. In the event of having missed the tale there, however, he could have read it in the American magazines *The Museum of Foreign Literature, Science and Art* or *Littel’s Spirit of the Magazines and Annuals*, both of which had the tale in their July 1838 issues.<sup>114</sup> Wherever he found it, the many resemblances between this tale and his “Ligeia,” first published in September 1838, demonstrate conclusively, I think, his acquaintance with “The Somnambulist.”

Like most of Poe’s tales, this is narrated in the first person by the male protagonist, only, in this case, orally, to the Pastor of St. Leonard mentioned in the title of the projected series, who provides a short narrative frame to the actual narrative. The story is obviously a critique of marriages of convenience, a common theme in Romantic literature. Some of the femicide stories we have looked at so far can also be read as reflections on that subject: Macnish’s femicide ostensibly abandons his first bride to court a rich heiress; the fabulous wealth of Dickens’s “madman” enables

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<sup>113</sup> I have been unable to determine the author of the tale. No other installment of the projected series appeared on *Tait’s*, or, to my knowledge, any other contemporary magazine. Its title indicates that it was modeled after the *Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician*, by Samuel Warren, published by *Blackwood* between 1832 and 1837.

<sup>114</sup> “The Somnambulist” appears in pages 377 through 386 of vol 33 of *Museum* and in pages 433-442 of vol. 7 of *Littel’s*. Both magazines were published in Philadelphia.

him to buy himself a blue-blooded bride from an impoverished aristocratic family. Their stories, which incidentally were both published before “The Somnambulist,” end in tragedy. Here, however, the common motif is given an unexpected twist. As I have before stated, the events in the tale are not doubtful. The narrator, a Scottish laird identified as Walter B——, *knows* that the sweetheart of his youth, the daughter of one of his tenants called Lucy Oliver, but known locally as the “Beauty of Dowielee,” poisoned the wine of his genteel wife Amelia in order to take her place (“The Somnambulist” 435). Indeed, her crime was not detected, and she became in time Walter’s second wife. He later found out the truth, but kept it a secret for many years. By the time he finally decides to unburden his conscience to the pastor, Lucy had herself been long dead and Walter was in his seventies. Of all the shady narrators we have encountered thus far, he and Poe’s narrator alone have been twice widowed when they decide to tell their tale.

When his first wife died, then, Walter ignored the real cause of her death. But perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he was not consciously aware of it. For, in retrospect, he blames himself for having overlooked the significance of the many signs that he now perceives but too clearly announced the catastrophe. In fact, Walter suggests he had been blinded by his love for Lucy, which he did not admit even to himself. Thus, only when Lucy re-enacted her crime, in the very room where it had been committed, in a state of somnambulism, did the narrator discover, or rather recognised the crime for which he feels partially responsible.

The narrator presents his story quite ostensibly as a tragedy, and himself as its hero. “I have experienced more pain in one minute of time than all the splendid and magnificent language of Æschylus in his ninety plays, or of Shakspeare in all he wrote, is capable of conveying to the mind of man,” he tells the minister, adding the ominous remark that “we get little consolation from our own consciences, in the midst of self-caused suffering, from any fine-spun distinction between blind error and voluntary crime” (“The Somnambulist” 84). To emphasise his error, then, the narrator chooses to confine his audience of one almost entirely to the narrow perspective of his tragically

blind former self, who, as it appears, simply did not want to see what was happening. At each point of the narrative, then, the reader knows only what the narrator himself had known, or what he allowed himself to recognise, at the time.

Thus, the story of Amelia's death is told twice. The first time around, the crime is not disclosed, but only obscurely intimated by increasingly clear hints, and the narrator's own comments, by which he shows us, in anticipation of the dramatic revelation he plans to make, that he knows more than he is telling. These intimations of his terrible secret, whose mysterious significance is retroactively settled by the catastrophe, are therefore perfect embodiments of the concept of tragic irony. Then follows the story of Walter's second marriage, with Lucy Oliver, at the culmination of which the narrator lets the murderess herself reveal the truth to the reader, as she had revealed it to him. Indeed, the somnambulist's reenactments of her crime—for the drama had to be repeated several times before the narrator finally brought himself to acknowledge its import—, clarify the meaning of the obscure omens and fills the holes the narrator had, to preserve the suspense, deliberately left in the first half of the tale. Thus, "The Somnambulist" is an interesting cross between a tragedy and the kind of conventional murder mystery of which *Barnaby Rudge* is an early example.

As a youth, then, Walter had been desperately in love with Lucy Oliver, but thought that it would be a dishonour for his family for him to marry a plebeian woman, and penniless to boot. He therefore broke his affair with her, which he assures us had never gone beyond sweet talk and the holding of hands, to woo a more convenient bride, his cousin Amelia Gordon, the daughter of his mother's brother, "a lovely young woman of eighteen years of age, highly educated, with refined sentiments" ("The Somnambulist" 86). Sometime after the birth of the couple's first child, a boy, Lucy approached Amelia offering her services. The narrator, who, out of embarrassment, had never told his wife about his innocent liaison, could not now divulge his secret without revealing his previous omission, which he regarded as a breach of the trust he owed to his wife. Since he had no

other credible reason to refuse, he took the easy way out, and consented to his wife's request to hire Lucy as a maid. He suggests, of course, that his judgement might have, even then, been swayed by his desire to be close to Lucy. This was the first in what the narrator suggests was a long series of tragic mistakes.

Lucy seemed completely devoted to her rival and, even when alone with her former lover, betrayed no recollection of their engagement. This was, of course, one of the first signs that something was amiss. In due course, Amelia became pregnant for the second time, and gave birth to a female child. Two days later, she was taken ill, and the doctor diagnosed "puerperal fever," which in those days was a real cause of concern ("The Somnambulist" 88). With the assistance of Lucy, the narrator tended to his wife in her sickness. At this point, he almost betrays his secret: "Good God! When I look back to that awful scene—my wife in the grasp of one of the most dangerous diseases incident to mortal; her nurse, my former lover (...); and I (...)—the witness of all that" ("The Somnambulist" 88).

After several days of agony, Amelia seemed finally out of danger. The relieved husband, exhausted by many sleepless nights, felt he could finally take a rest. He fell asleep on the couch—which we later find out was in the next room—, entrusting his wife to Lucy. Two hours later, however, she wakes him up to inform him that his "dear wife" had "relapsed during night:" "The lovely victim," he remarks, "was in the firm grasp of the grim Destroyer" ("The Somnambulist" 88-89). The narrator is being deliberately disingenuous, of course. Indeed, he admits that he knows more than he cares to disclose at this time: "I cannot continue these details" (89). The reason why he abstains from going into the details, expressing himself by carefully worded metaphor to refer to the cause of his first wife's death, is that he intends to maintain the suspense. He already knows that when Lucy saw that Amelia might pull through, she had decided not to let the outcome of her illness, on which her hopes to replace her husband, to chance. While he slept, she had slipped some

poison into the convalescent's medicinal wine which her doctors had, according to what appears to have been then the general practice, prescribed to her.

This scene, as the reader has no doubt noticed, foreshadows many details of "Ligeia." As usual, however, Poe appears to have mixed things up quite a bit. The parallelism that immediately stands out is with Rowena's story. The narrator of Poe's tale evidently believes his former partner caused, or at least hastened the death of his bed-ridden second wife, which also resembles Amelia in being an aristocrat, by slipping some pernicious liquid into her wine. However, structurally as well as stylistically, this scene very closely mirrors, rather, the description of *Ligeia's* death.

Indeed, both tales can be divided very neatly in two parts: one recounts the first marriage, placing particular emphasis on the death of the wife, which is rendered in very vague terms; the second recounts the second marriage, but is mostly occupied, as we shall see, with a very detailed description of a ghostly drama that takes place in the couple's bedroom and which is ultimately found to be a depiction of the scene of which only a very mysterious account had been given earlier: the death of the first wife. The first-person narrators both deliberately conceal crucial details about their *first* wife's death in the middle of the tale. Indeed, the narrator of "Ligeia" also interrupts his description of the scene, by declaring that "upon this subject I cannot bear to dilate," a phrase which is the exact equivalent, both in meaning and function, of the one employed by Walter in the corresponding point of his narrative (Poe, "Ligeia" 317). However, these men are being cagey for different reasons. The husband in "The Somnambulist" saves the revelation that Amelia had been poisoned by Lucy for dramatic effect. This revelation is to coincide with the anagnorisis of the tragedy of which he is simultaneously the hero and the narrator, that is, the moment in which he himself discovered the terrible truth that he apparently was hiding from himself. The narrator of "Ligeia," on the other hand, does not clarify his reasons for keeping the reader in the dark, but obscurely intimates his secret through the same kind of irony which anticipates the revelation in "The Somnambulist."

To keep the tragic suspense, then, the somnambulist's husband "cannot" tell us what really killed Amelia. Indeed, he actively misleads the pastor, and by extension the reader, into thinking she had died of natural causes. He resorts to a technique often employed by Poe: weasel-wording. Specifically, he uses a personification of death to disguise Lucy's role: "the grim Destroyer." Similar expressions such as "the grim Azrael" and "the Shadow," performed much the same function in "Ligeia," only in that case, the murderer whose identity they were designed to conceal was the narrator himself who, in his pride, thought he could keep the secret forever from his reader ("Ligeia" 316-17). The narrator of "The Somnambulist," who *now* sees what he did not want to see *then*, deliberately plants clues to Lucy's crime, even while he turns the reader's thoughts in another direction—this is the very definition of misdirection. His counterpart in "Ligeia," although he seems genuinely intent on concealing the crime, for whatever reason, appears to be equally unwilling to resort to downright lies.

But, unlike Lucy, Ligeia had an iron-clad alibi for the murder of Rowena: she had been dead for years. More importantly, in the first "mysterious" part of the tale, Ligeia appears in a role that clearly corresponds to that of the *poisoned* Amelia, while the narrator engages in the same kind of cover-up that characterises the corresponding portion of "The Somnambulist," with the important difference that he never discloses—not consciously—what it was that he left unsaid. Thus, an alternative parallelism slowly begins to emerge, between the narrator and the murderess, which is in fact both more viable and more significant.

This parallelism is reiterated in the second part of "Ligeia," where the coincidences between the two tales continue to pile up. Two years after Amelia's death, Walter and his first love were finally wedded, and he "again experienced human happiness greater than mortals generally are destined to enjoy in this world" ("The Somnambulist" 89). In the corresponding point of Poe's tale, we find a very similar phrase employed in a very different sense: "I had no lack of what the world calls wealth. Ligeia had brought me far more, very far more than ordinarily falls to the lot of

mortals" ("Ligeia," 320 emphasis mine). Both men recognise that they stood to gain something from their first wife's death, more than most "mortals" can ever hope to enjoy. But they are speaking of widely different gains, and this illustrates the differences between the two.

Whereas Walter speaks of conjugal bliss, Poe's narrator speaks of money. In both cases, the death of the first wife enabled them to fulfil their secret dreams, but these too were very different in nature. Walter had evidently never forgotten Lucy. The fact that he let the tragedy happen, suggests that he secretly desired to marry her, which, after Amelia had given him a legitimate offspring not unworthy of his family, he considered himself free to do. Even so, he regrets the wife he lost, as is indicated by his claim that he was happy "again." Poe's narrator, on the other hand, was finally free to indulge those "follies" for which "even in childhood" he had "imbibed a taste," and which evidently included a somewhat morbid fascination with the dead (Poe, "Ligeia" 320).

As always, the similarities between Poe's tale and his source render the deviations from the parallelism significant. Unlike Poe's narrator, Walter was, for a while, very happy with his new wife. But, like Amelia, she too was taken ill after the birth of their first child—Walter's third. She became weak and emaciated and suffered from "neuralgic pains" ("The Somnambulist" 89). But the most distressing symptom of her strange affliction were the strange nightmares that disturbed her sleep. This was, of course, the first sign of a guilty conscience.

"A change now came over my dear Lucy," her husband recounts ("The Somnambulist" 89). The nightmares ceased, but she began to talk in her sleep. At first, she uttered only "mutterings and broken unintelligible speech" (89). Soon after, she took to walking in her sleep. The first time this happened, the narrator tried to bring her back to bed: "She uttered a long piercing scream, and, escaping from my grasp, fell senseless on the floor" (89). The following night, he decided to leave a candle burning, so he could follow the somnambulist's movements, in case a new attack should occur. He was indeed presented with a drama that he would never forget, but the obvious meaning of which was at first lost on him:

At the same hour [midnight] she rose and left the bed, walking erectly and firmly, as if her weakness had suddenly left her, and she had been restored to health. She went to a small rosewood cupboard that stood in the end of the room, and opened it, taking from it a small bottle, which she folded in her arms and pressed to her bosom. She then held it up to the light of the taper, and sighed deeply as she looked through it. She turned her face to the bed, and stared at me with open lack-lustre eyes for several minutes. (90)

Although she was staring at the narrator, in his place the somnambulist “saw” Amelia, whom she had poisoned as she was laying in that very bed. Indeed, Lucy accompanies her performance with a soliloquy that confirms that she was dreaming about her rival:

Keeping this frightful attitude, with the bottle held up in her hand, she spoke:

“She is past danger now, and will recover.” (A pause, and listening.) “That breathin is lighter—no sae like death—her mains and grains are gane—the struggle’s past, and, when she recovers, I maun continue to dress her for his eye and undress her for his embrace. Shall that be guid help?” (Looking through the vial.) “Na, na, she has had her time, and mine waits me. A revivin’ patient needs a cordial. Hark! he comes from the couch in the next room. (...) Quick—quick!—his twa hours are oot, and he’ll have a braw awakenin: she canna refuse a cordial frae the hands o’ Lucy Oliver.”

(“The Somnambulist” 90)

Evidently, the somnambulist was going through the motions of killing Amelia. “She now approached the bed where I lay in a state of horripilation. (...) I lay, bound to the bed, without power to move, to think, to speak” (“The Somnambulist” 90). She now addressed the narrator directly, to offer him the harmless “cordial,” while dreaming she once again was ministering the fatal draught to Amelia: “Quick, dear leddie—ay, ay—there, there—a drap still remains, it’s owre precious to be



lost. There—you will sleep now; and when ye waken, Dowielee will kiss ye in joy o’ your recovery” (90).<sup>115</sup>

Judging from these words, one supposes the narrator took his medicine from the hands of his sleepwalking nurse. At this point, the reader *knows* Lucy had poisoned Amelia. The narrator, however, did not get the message. Or rather, he could not bring himself to admit the unmistakable meaning of the weird theatrical performance he had witnessed: “Was there anything in Lucy’s words that indicated more? (...) But to what did my doubts point? I could not mention it. The thought was not recognized by me by as an act of my conscious mind. It was a rebel. I quelled it” (“The Somnambulist” 90). He reassured himself with the thought that “somnambulists do strange things in their nocturnal vocations” (90). By “strange” he means, of course, meaningless. But the somnambulist would not allow him much longer to ignore the truth.

Two nights later, she staged a revised version of her original performance. “Her manner was more confused on this occasion; for she approached and receded the bed; walked along the room with a rapid step; repeated these motions eight or ten times; and, at last, stood still in the middle of the apartment” (“The Somnambulist” 90). This time, her soliloquy was even more explicit: “I can wait nae langer. This chance has failed. (...) the fever has passed its dangerous hour. Now or never! Lucy Oliver or Amelia Gordon maun dee. She or I maun drink this black death, to the health o’ Apothecary Watson, wha, silly man, refused at first to gie me’t” (90). Thus, the somnambulist made it impossible for her husband to ignore the meaning of the ceremony she was about to perform for the second time. She went “through the same series of movements, and using nearly the same words, as on the previous occasion” (91).

The whole episode has an obvious resemblance with the mysterious ghostly drama in Rowena’s room. But the play of masks in “Ligeia” confuses the picture. The most conspicuous, and superficial evidence reiterates the identification of Lucy and Ligeia. In the final scene of the tale,

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<sup>115</sup> Lucy significantly addresses the narrator, her future husband, by the name of his estate. With this touch, the anonymous author emphasises class difference, which is also made apparent by the language in which they express themselves: she always in Scots, he in what was once known as “the king’s English.”

this identification is mostly suggested by her *position*, and by an odd choice of words on the narrator's part. Indeed, according to the narrator, she arose from the bed, and, "with the manner of one bewildered in a dream, (...) advanced (...) into the middle of the apartment," where she *appears* to have previously poisoned her successor (Poe, "Ligeia" 329 emphasis mine). The somnambulist delivers her ominous soliloquy, precisely, in the middle of her room, before her husband's eyes. The phrase "one bewildered in a dream," which clearly evokes the idea of sleepwalking, I think clinches the allusion.

But the phrase partakes of the same ambiguity that pervades Poe's entire tale. We can take it to mean that Ligeia was dreaming, hence sleepwalking—this would be the most idiomatic interpretation—, but also that the figure was such as "one bewildered" might appear in "a dream," hence, that the narrator was the one "dreaming." This latter construal, although technically possible, might appear a little forced—that is, until we realise that it makes much better sense than the straight reading.

The "drops" which support the identification of Ligeia with the poisoner, of course, had themselves felt like a dream to the narrator. In fact, the evidence suggesting the identification of the *narrator* of "Ligeia" with the killer-somnambulist is much more compelling, if less conspicuous, than that which suggests the identification of the latter with Ligeia, which is entirely phantasmagoric. The narrator's very behaviour in Rowena's room very closely matches that of the somnambulist reliving her crime, and this suggests that he too was "dreaming" about another occasion. He too "hastened across the chamber" to get the wine that had been prescribed to his wife; on his way back to her bed, moreover, he too paused *in the middle of the apartment*; and, during the "drama of revivification" that ensued some days later, he, also like the somnambulist, was stuck in a rut, repeating over and over the same movements, while dreaming about the dead Ligeia. Instead of her paralysed husband the sleeping Lucy "saw" the dead Amelia; likewise, the narrator of Poe's tale "saw" Ligeia whenever he approached the unresponsive body of Rowena. Finally, the sleeping Lucy

did not *really* poison her husband, and, apparently, neither did the narrator of Poe's tale poison Rowena.

But, although the drama is distinctly similar, the roles of the husband and wife are significantly inverted in Poe's tale. The very detailed parallelism suggests that the husband was the one dreaming, only in this case he was daydreaming, and also that the dream had the same meaning in both tales. He was apparently under the same compulsion to reveal a former crime by which Lucy was actuated. In "Ligeia," however, we are seeing the crime not from the victim's perspective, but through the murderer's eyes.

Conversely, Walter's position in the drama that made Lucy's crime and his error apparent to him, perfectly parallels not that of the narrator of Poe's tale, but rather that of the ill-fated Rowena in the night of the ruby-drops. This parallelism in turn indirectly corroborates the explanation I have previously supplied for the latter's death. For in Walter's description of the nervous breakdown he suffered after being forced to see what he had so long fooled himself into not seeing, we see depicted the full horror of Rowena's position from the eyes of the victim.

Indeed, the revelation of Lucy's crime made such a powerful impression on Walter that he was "seized with a fever" ("The Somnambulist" 91). Lucy then resumed, to her husband's unspeakable terror, the role of nurse. She tended to him with the same apparent zeal she had displayed towards Amelia. But now that he knew how perfectly she had dissembled her true feelings, he could not trust her: "I saw often at my bedside, Lucy Oliver, my wife, who administered to me medicine—*cordials*—restoratives. O God! what were the thoughts which, suggested by her image, changed and coloured by a maniac fancy, mixed with the recollections of Amelia Gordon! (...) I recovered from the fever; but I convalesced with poison on my mind" (91).

Imaginary poison, then, almost killed Walter. Every time Lucy gave him a "cordial," he imagined it was poisoned. After all, she had already poisoned him once in imagination. Evidently, Rowena lived in the same perpetual fear of being poisoned, which is but too clearly indicated by her

refusal to drink the wine from the hands of her husband. She had in fact more reasons to be terrified. Lucy had killed Amelia for Walter's sake—she loved him. Rowena's husband, on the other hand, detested his wife, and was not afraid to show it.

Walter is technically innocent of the murder of his wife. However, he clearly was indirectly responsible for it. Lucy was, he tells us, the “doating, resigned, conquered, love-distracted girl, the daughter of my (...) cottar;” “the conquered being whose fate was in my hands” (“The Somnambulist” 86). This submission flattered the male pride of her lover, while also confirming his sense of class superiority. His peasant lover was, in fact, his slave: “her thoughts followed the train of my ideas; her feelings were gratified only by a sympathy which she drew from my thoughts, words, looks, and sighs” (86).

He implies, then, that there was between Lucy and him a rapport so perfect that she could guess his unexpressed yearnings from “looks” and “sighs.” Considering she was a “somnambulist,” his sentence evokes the supposed power the animal magnetists claimed they had over their subjects’ wills. Thus, Lucy’s crime must be referred to a secret desire of the narrator to get rid of Amelia. By his constant self-reproaches, the narrator intimates that this was so. Lucy lived only to make him happy, therefore, would never do anything to make him *unhappy*. Thus, one may regard “The Somnambulist,” even though the actual poisoning was done by Lucy, as a story of femicide by proxy.

Lucy, then, displayed that idolatrous love Ligeia’s husband craved, and of which he thought, against all evidence, she had given full proof by ridding him of a wife he hated. This conclusion is not only preposterous, but also incompatible with what we know of Ligeia’s character. Whereas Lucy had no will but Walter’s, Ligeia had “a giant will” (Poe, “Ligeia” 318n). Thus, the parallel with “The Somnambulist” suggests what all evidence confirms: that Ligeia was not the murderer, but the victim, and that her murderer, the narrator of the tale, unconsciously staged his crime in a trance that was, in many respects, akin to somnambulism. Indeed, “The Somnambulist” provides a

model of unconscious behaviour that perfectly fits Poe's tale, showing, once again, the mistake in reading the unexplainable urges of Poe's narrators in psychoanalytical terms.

The reluctance of the narrator of "The Somnambulist" to see the truth was, of course, itself dictated by an unconscious urge. He persistently refused to see the truth his somnambulist wife was busily trying to convey to him. But he was eventually compelled to fit the pieces together—the words and the gestures. He recognised at last that the dream had reference to that fateful night when he had decided to take a nap:

Her tale was now more connected, and filled with an import more dreadful. It bore a character of waking reality—borrowing from the waking occurrences of life, facts—undeniable, melancholy truths—turning them to a rational account, and explaining even those very parts of her conduct which never, in my estimation, quadrated with human nature. My mind tried to escape from the fearful, connected, rational sense of her monologue. Its truth horrified me. ("The Somnambulist" 91)

Poe's narrator combines the somnambulist's urge to denounce herself with her husband's reluctance to admit the evident meaning of the unconscious drama. This is what confers to "Ligeia" its peculiar atmosphere of terror. For the narrator is himself terrified. His delirium, of course, is as "connected" and fraught with meaning as the somnambulist's. By subtly leading his reader to this passage, Poe once again prompts us to fit the pieces of his narrator's delirium together, like Walter has done with his wife's dream. At first, we too cannot bring ourselves to accept the "rational sense" of the drama in "Ligeia"—but there simply is no escaping the truth.

I think of "Ligeia" as a very elaborate, very strange labyrinth. At first, all paths appear to be blocked. Indeed, after a few twists and turns we get the feeling that we will inevitably get lost in the tangled maze of horror Poe prepared for us. Yet, on cool examination, we find that, no matter how tortuous, all paths lead to the goal. In the end, we are rewarded with a name for all the horror of the

tale: femicide. And, as Poe often reminded us, a known crime is always preferable to a nameless horror.

## 9 — “Shadow of a Shade:” Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* and the Poetics of Delusion

As usual, Poe’s buried allusion to his source slyly highlights the cleverness of his adaptation of the source material. In “Ligeia” Poe merged the two protagonists of “The Somnambulist” into one, making the guilty “somnambulist” the narrator of his own tale, but also the baffled spectator of the phantasmagoric drama that ultimately reveals to the reader the crime he had concealed. Each hint he misses, each obscure allusion returns the same picture of a deluded, mystified femicide. This picture gets more detailed and consistent each time one of the mysteries in the tale is solved. It was always the narrator. His mark is everywhere. But, in order to recognise this, we must resist his appeal to seek the answers in the depths, where everything gets vague and indefinite.

The crucial clue by which the narrator betrays himself is that “shadow of a shade,” which he saw in the middle of the room in the tower of his dilapidated abbey, which is the semantic node on which all other clues depend (Poe “Ligeia” 325). This is one of those salient phrases that, by their very peculiarity, suggest that their meaning depends on some foundational text which, conscious or unconsciously, has made its way to the author’s mind. In his explanatory notes, Mabbott writes, with his usual terseness, that “‘Shadow of a shade’ recalls *Hamlet* (...), ‘A dream itself is but a shadow’” (*Tales* 334n30). Evidently, he thought the connection was self-evident. Here is the relevant passage in Shakespeare, in its entirety:

HAMLET O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

GUILDENSTERN Which dreams indeed are ambition. For the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.

HAMLET A dream itself is but a shadow.

ROSENCRANTZ Truly; and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow’s shadow. (*Hamlet* 2.2.253-261)

The exchange, with its suggestion of waking dreams, blends well with the atmosphere of uncertainty in Poe's tale. Indeed, the two passages resonate. The narrator is constantly dreaming, even when awake, about Ligeia; when he sees the "shadow" he imagines it belongs to his recurring dream, which would make it, of course, a shadow of a dream, hence a shadow of a shadow. But this somehow does not seem entirely satisfactory. One senses some ulterior connection, such as one is tempted to express in terms of a symbolical relationship. Perhaps the shadow represents the narrator's aspirations to a transcendent knowledge, which can in turn be seen as symbolic of the Romantic poet's exaggerated ambitions. On a straight reading of the tale, such an interpretation appears viable.

Still, the connection is not pointed enough to generate more than a feeling of vague allusiveness—the same sort of connection that the narrator of the tale felt existed between the mystery of Ligeia and some books he read. But the association of the idea of involuntary self-incrimination, the phrase "shadow of a shade," and a mimic drama depicting the killing of a woman coalesces into a definite allusion to an episode in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), where the phrase, which despite its Shakespearean flavor does not appear in any of Shakespeare's works, is applied to precisely such a pantomime. The somnambulist drama in Poe's tale and this pantomime are not only vaguely similar, they click together in a way that indicates not only that Poe had read *The Italian*, but also that he intended to point to his reader the similarities between the episode in question and his own text.

The protagonist of *The Italian*, the proud Count di Marinella, had taken the vows under the assumed name of Schedoni after having attempted to kill his wife for an imaginary infidelity. Having left her for dead, he never learned she had in fact survived, and dies with the supposed crime on his conscience. This circumstance is also kept from the reader until the penultimate chapter. Thus, Radcliffe manages to make femicide the theme of her novel, and yet save appearances. Schedoni was, of course, morally a femicide. Moreover, he was quite willing to kill



women. Indeed, he was about to stab the rather unremarkable heroine Elena in her sleep when he saw a locket around her neck which convinced him that she was his daughter—in another surprising twist, the reader is later informed that she was in fact his niece. He would have killed any woman *but* his daughter, and therefore spared her.

Immediately after this scene, the monk comes across a country fair. There, by another of those improbable coincidences for which Radcliffe's novels are notable, a group of travelling entertainers was performing a play that depicted precisely the crime he thought he had just been on the point of committing. In a "theatre, (...) a mimic opera, the 'shadow of a shade,' was exhibiting," which occasioned a "roar of laughter, excited by the principal *buffo* within" (Radcliffe, *The Italian* 273). On closer inspection, however, Schedoni and his fellow-travelers find that the "crowd" which "assembled round a stage on which some persons grotesquely dressed, were performing" had misinterpreted the ambiguous pantomime: "The people above were acting what seemed to have been intended for a tragedy, but what their strange gestures, and incongruous countenances, had transformed into a comedy" (274).

Schedoni's simple-minded guide illustrates the perplexity the incongruous play occasioned among the public, who, moments earlier, had been laughing: "the peasant, with gaping mouth and staring eyes, stood like a statue, yet not knowing whether he ought to laugh or cry, till suddenly turning round to the Confessor [Schedoni], (...) he seized his arm, and pointing to the stage, called out, 'Look! Signor, see! What a scoundrel! what a villain! See! he has murdered his own daughter!'" (Radcliffe, *The Italian* 274). Thus, when the leading performer acts out the murder of his daughter on stage, the nature of the play finally becomes evident, even to the most illiterate among the public. The well-educated monk, on his part, immediately "perceived that the actors were performing the story of Virginia," a well-known episode of Roman history on which Chaucer's "Physician's Tale" and John Webster's tragedy *Appius and Virginia* were based: "It was at the moment when she was dying in the arms of her father, who was holding the poniard, with which he

stabbed her. The feelings of Schedoni, at this instant, inflicted a punishment almost worthy of the crime he had meditated” (275).

Betrayed by a heavy conscience, the sneaky monk loses his habitual composure when he sees an exact depiction of the crime he had plotted—he too had intended to *stab* the young woman he believes is his daughter. Elena, his intended victim, “perceived, with surprize, the changing emotions of his soul, and the inexplicable character of his countenance” (Radcliffe, *The Italian* 275). Noticing he is acting suspiciously, the monk flies into a rage and hastily flees the scene, drawing even more unwanted attention on himself.

This scene and the “drama” in Rowena’s room dovetail nicely into each other, although, as usual, the connection depends on the true story, which has to be deduced from the scattered clues in “Ligeia.” Still, the meaning of Poe’s allusion—for we can no longer doubt that it is an allusion—is now perfectly clear, I think. Radcliffe’s monk sees his crime represented in a pantomime entitled “shadow of a shade” and betrays himself; Poe’s monk-like narrator plays the “principal *buffo*” in a pantomime representing his former crime—for his performance too is silent—, without recognising that the “shadow of a shade” was his own. Thus, in the crucial moment in which the narrator fails to recognise his own shadow, thus betraying himself to the reader, Poe evokes the scene in which Schedoni involuntarily exhibits his own guilt.

Radcliffe’s scene was itself an obvious nod to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, more specifically to the cunning plan the hero of the tragedy devises to verify his suspicion that his uncle had poisoned his father. The prince of Denmark arranges for a play depicting a poisoning to be performed before the presumptive murderer, which he calls “The Mousetrap” (see Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.2). During the performance, he and Horacio observe the reactions of the suspect, whose guilt becomes indeed manifest. Thus, one might say that the allusion to Radcliffe redirects the vague allusion to Shakespeare.

Nevertheless, the true subtext of Poe's scene is Radcliffe's version of "The Mouse Trap," which has a much more complete and meaningful parallelism with his tale. The reaction of the public to the grotesque pantomime is a perfect allegory of the recognition by the reader of the true import of the ghostly drama in "Ligeia" and, by extension, of the tale itself. The spectators of Radcliffe's "shadow of a shade" could not, at first, understand what was going on in the stage or what the play was about—this was hardly surprising, as the play had no words. The suspense ends when the leading player goes through the motions of stabbing a woman on the stage—the public realises then that the play was a tragedy, and not, as it had seemed, a comedy. Likewise, the readers of "Ligeia" are forced to revise their interpretation of the silent "drama" performed by the narrator once they realise that he was not actually "reviving" Rowena, but reenacting the murder of Ligeia. Only in his case, the "principal *buffo*" was not consciously aware of what the play was about, or even that he was playing a part. In the terms of this allegory, then, the position of the readers of "Ligeia" vis-à-vis the phantasmagoria corresponds to that of the baffled spectators of Radcliffe's misleading pantomime. Thus, the guilt of the narrator of "Ligeia," that is uncovered by carefully fitting the pieces of the mystery together, is in a way corroborated by Poe's allusion.

Ligeia's poem, which Poe added to the tale in 1845, has commonly been read, like the tale itself, as a cosmical allegory. Indeed, it has mostly been taken as an exposition of the symbolism of the tale in which it was included. The tone and the imagery of the poem, being vaguely reminiscent of the poetry of the English metaphysical poets, certainly invite this sort of reading: a group of "angels," wearing veils over their faces, attend a drama in which a "worm" devours human-shaped "mimes." Richard Wilbur, in an explanatory note to the poem included in his 1959 edition of Poe's *Poems*, was perhaps the first to attempt a systematic explanation of the symbolism:

This poem represents man's condition in the Biblical "latter years." The universe has reached maximum diffusion and incoherence, the Earth is physically and spiritually at its remotest from God (hence "lonesome"), and its purgation by cataclysm is at

hand. The music of the spheres is “fitful” because the universe is near-chaotic. Since they are closer than man to the divine order that was and shall be, the angels weep at the “formless” disorder of life on Earth, and at the thought that creatures made in the image of “God on high” must inexplicably be casualties of the cosmic process.

(“Introduction” 142)

For Wilbur, poem and tale embodied the same “cosmic myth” which he considered to be a “justification of his [Poe’s] kind of poetry, making it not only purposive but indispensable, and rendering the poet not only elect, but Godlike” (Wilbur, *Complete Poems* 12). At first glance, this appears an acceptable interpretation of the tableau presented in the first three stanzas of the poem:

Lo! ‘tis a gala night

Within the lonesome latter years!

An angel throng, bewinged, bedight

In veils, and drowned in tears,

Sit in a theatre, to see

A play of hopes and fears,

While the orchestra breathes fitfully

The music of the spheres.

Mimes, in the form of God on high,

Mutter and mumble low,

And hither and thither fly —

Mere puppets they, who come and go

At bidding of vast formless things

That shift the scenery to and fro,

Flapping from out their Condor wings

Invisible Wo!

That motley drama! — oh, be sure

It shall not be forgot!

With its phantom chased forevermore,

By a crowd that seized it not,

Through a circle that ever returneth in

To the self-same spot,

And much of Madness and more of Sin,

And Horror the soul of the plot. (Poe, "Ligeia" 318)

The angels' initial response to the play is, indeed, characterised by incomprehension, pity, and finally horror. Despite the hints of "madness" and "sin," the irresistible forces that determine the suffering of the human mimes seemed inscrutable to the public. This is apparently compatible with Wilbur's idea that the angels lamented the cosmic tragedy of human existence in an absurd world, in which death reigned supreme. However, there are certain ambiguities in the poem that destabilise the allegory. Later, when he prepared the notes to his edition of the poem, Mabbott, ostensibly recovering Wilbur's interpretation, attempted to flesh out more fully the symbolical meaning of the figures.<sup>116</sup> In reality, however, he ended up highlighting the impossibility of coming up with a coherent symbolical reading. Thus, he explains that: "The phantom is Happiness" (Mabbott, *Complete Poems* 327n19). Although intended as a clarification, this identification actually short-circuits the allegory. What is more, it flatly contradicts Wilbur's interpretation.

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<sup>116</sup> Indeed, Mabbott gave the form of a methodical commentary to Wilbur's relatively unsystematic interpretation. Regarding the "phrase 'the lonesome latter years,'" in the second line, he notices that: "According to a note by Richard Wilbur (...), Poe here suggests that the end of the world approaches" (*Talies* 1:326n2). Mabbott obviously agrees. Then, commenting on the last two lines of that stanza, he again paraphrases Wilbur: "The music of the spheres is fitful because of the disharmony of the degenerate world, Wilbur explains" (1:327n7). In both cases, he paraphrases from Wilbur's ten lines long note to the poem, most of which is transcribed above.

If the phantom *is* Happiness, then the “crowd” chasing vainly after it *is* Humanity. This is the time-honoured meaning of the stock allegory to which Mabbott tacitly alludes. However, in the poem, the ones doing the chasing appear to be the angels, as implied by the use of “crowd,” a synonym of “throng” in the third line. Yet, in Wilbur’s interpretation, the angels, who witnessed but did not participate in the drama, did *not* stand for humanity—the helpless “mimes” did, and they were not chasing after the “phantom.” They appear, rather, to have been chased by it. Indeed, the phrase “in the form of God on high,” in the beginning of the second stanza, a clear paraphrase of *Genesis* 1.27, renders the identification between the “mimes” and humankind binding. As a result, the identification of the “phantom” with happiness becomes positively absurd. Thus, although they both regarded the poem as a serious allegory manifesting Poe’s visionary theories about the Cosmos, Mabbott and Wilbur were not only unable to provide a reasonable, coherent explanation of the allegory, they could not even agree on its meaning.

More importantly, both ignore the crucial moment of recognition. The angels were, indeed, trapped in a vicious circle of incomprehension—but this circle is broken when the hideous “worm” emerges, and starts slaughtering the “mimes,” thus providing a concrete object to the vague horror of the previous stanzas. The entrance of the “worm” corresponds to the anagnorisis of the tragedy being performed. But, given the play-within-a-play structure of the poem, the focus is on the audience. Although initially baffled, they now finally understand what the play was about, and their attitude undergoes a complete reversal. This unexpected twist is introduced by a very conspicuous “but” in the fourth stanza:

But see, amid the mimic rout

A crawling shape intrude!

A blood-red thing that writhes from out

The scenic solitude!

It writhes! — it writhes! — with mortal pangs

The mimes become its food,  
And seraphs sob at vermin fangs  
In human gore imbued.

Out — out are the lights — out all!  
And, over each quivering form,  
The curtain, a funeral pall,  
Comes down with the rush of a storm,  
While the angels, all pallid and wan,  
Uprising, unveiling, affirm  
That the play is the tragedy, “Man,”  
And its hero the Conqueror Worm. (Poe, “Ligeia” 319)

At first, the presence of the monster was only indirectly indicated by the mimes’ suffering: the “invisible wo.” Indeed, they appeared “puppets,” whose actions were determined by “vast formless things,” which correspond to the “phantom” in the third stanza. Once the “worm” emerges from the “scenic solitude,” however, the angels understand that he was, as it were, pulling the strings from behind the scenes. Thus, the formless horror that had the human-like figures running about finally acquires a shape and, consequently, the movements of the mimes become themselves intelligible, when the hero of the tragedy, the “worm,” reveals himself. The terrible catastrophe marks the abrupt end of the drama, and, after the curtain falls over the ghastly scene, the angels significantly remove their veils, the obvious symbol of their blindness, before they “affirm” its meaning.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Poe may also have had in mind Matthew Lewis’ account of the only public performance of his “monodrama” “The Captive,” published in the anonymous volume *The Life and Correspondence of M. G. Lewis* in 1839, in which he reports that “two people went into hysterics during the performance, and two more after the curtain dropped,” declaring that: “The only chance was, whether pity would make the audience weep; but, instead of that, terror threw them into fits” (234).

Wilbur's and Mabbott's apocalyptic interpretations were predicated on the assumption that the angels remained in a state of ignorance to the end, but this is clearly not borne out by the text. In fact, although the third stanza mentions the "phantom" of the play being "chased forevermore" by "a crowd that seize it not," this is not a statement of fact. On the contrary, the stanza clearly expresses a desire that this might not come to be. Also decisive is the implied suggested identification of "Man" with the "Conqueror Worm," which further disturbs the cosmic allegory. Indeed, most tragedies are named after their heroes. The "mimes," on the other hand, have only a passive role in the tragedy, and therefore are evidently not the "hero" of the tragedy.

Poe reinforces this correspondence by another covert allusion. "It is (...) likely," Mabbott writes, "that Poe's impulse to write his poem came from a passage in a review in *Graham's Magazine* for February 1841 of Dr. James McHenry's epic, *The Antediluvians*," which "can hardly have escaped" Poe's "eye" (Mabbott, *Complete Poems* 324). McHenry's text contained some lines which developed the same basic conceit around which "The Conqueror Worm" revolves: "Such scenes of cruelty and blood, / Exhibited before appalled heaven, / To make the angels weep, to look on earth!" (qtd. in Mabbott, *Complete Poems* 324). The review traces this idea to a passage in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*: "But man, proud man, / Dress'd in a little brief authority, / Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd— / His glassy essence—like an angry ape / Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven / as makes the angels weep" (Shakespeare, *Measure* 2.2.118-124).<sup>118</sup> Mabbott thought that the only thing these texts had in common with Poe's poem was the idea of angels weeping at the spectacle afforded by humans "and especially the *frailty* of man" (324). But these echoes evidently reinforce also the identification of the cruel "worm" with "man," and the latter's "ignorance" of precisely those subjects in his knowledge of which he feels more confident. These connections appear to me to be equally decisive to the implied meaning of Poe's tale.<sup>119</sup>

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118 Shakespeare's text, however, was truncated in the review.

119 The last stanza of the poem, incidentally, itself provides a spectacular illustration of Poe's method of combination. Another "inspiration," Mabbott remarks in the introduction to his edition of the poem, "may have come, as Ingram



The cosmical reading proposed by Wilbur, of course, requires us to read “man” as an ungendered term, designating humankind in the aggregate. But the narrator’s self-incrimination in the bridal chamber brings gender back with a vengeance. Suddenly, we realise that we know Ligeia only through the man that killed her, and this forces us to read gender back into her words. This applies also to her commentary on the poem: “O God! O Divine Father! — shall these things be undeviatingly so? — shall this Conqueror be not once conquered? Are we not part and parcel in Thee? Who — who knoweth the mysteries of the will with its vigor? Man doth not yield himself to the angels, *nor unto death utterly*, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (Poe, “Ligeia”

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observed, from a little verse romance, *The Proud Ladye* (1840), by an obscure New York poet, Spencer Wallace Cone,” which “Poe reviewed (...) in *Burton’s* for June 1840” (Mabbott, *Complete Poems* 324). However, the two poems have little else in common.

The final stanza of the poem, however, contains equally distinct echoes of two other sources which, as far as I know, had hitherto not been identified. The comparison of the curtain in a theatre with a “funeral pall” is clearly inspired in Scott’s motto to chapter XXXIII (or chapter X, vol. III, in the first edition) of *Anne of Geierstein* (1829):

Toll, toll the bell!  
Greatness is o’er,  
The heart has broke,  
To ache no more;  
An unsubstantial pageant all—

Drop o’er the scene the funeral pall. (366)

These lines are identified simply as from an “old poem.” J. H. Alexander, who prepared the Edinburgh Edition of the novel I have used, writes that this was “not identified; probably by Scott” (Scott, *Geierstein* 563n). The thematic similarity and the rhyme “all”-“pall” practically confirms Poe’s borrowing.

Indeed, Poe’s use of the same rhyming words betrays a deliberate allusion. The same strategy is used, I think, in the same stanza, to allude to another of Poe’s sources, the penultimate stanza of the short poem “Man” by George Herbert (1593-1633):

More servants wait on Man,  
Than he’ll take notice of: in ev’ry path  
He treads down that which doth befriend him,  
When sickness makes him pale and wan.  
O mighty love! Man is one world, and hath  
Another to attend him. (85)

The last stanza of “The Conqueror Worm,” has “pallid and wan” rhyming with “Man.” The parallel is, I think, quite irrefusable. This echo reinforces the connection between Poe’s poem and the metaphysical poets. Inasmuch as it may prompt the reader to think the poem is a cosmical allegory in their manner, the allusion is misleading. Yet, as usual, the correspondences are significantly altered in Poe’s poem. The phrase “pale and wan” refers, in Herbert’s poem, to “man” himself; Poe’s “pallid and wan” refers rather to the angels, that weep at the spectacle of human beings being slaughtered by the “worm.”

The allusion to Herbert’s poem is very significant in the context of American letters in Poe’s time. Emerson had quoted most of the poem in his first book, *Nature* (1836). In fact, he quotes the first sentence in the stanza above in chapter II, “Commodity,” and the majority of the poem, with only the fifth and seventh last stanzas omitted, in the last, “Prospects.” Given the centrality of Emerson in American Transcendentalism, one might say that George Herbert’s “Man” is itself a fundamental text for the movement. In fact, *Nature* may be read as a sort of extended gloss, or meditation on the poem. I think, therefore, that this is an indirect allusion to Emerson, or rather, a stab at him, that is crucial to understanding Poe’s relationship with Transcendentalism.

319). Man means “not woman;” it also means “the Conqueror,” her conqueror, whom Ligeia hopes may someday himself be conquered by means of the “feebleness” of his own “will.”

She appeals to God, then, not in the name of “Man,” but of woman. Thus, the obscure sense of her prophetic poem also becomes apparent. The implied identification of the “worm” with man seems, at first, not to make sense, as the “mimes” are explicitly identified as humans. This apparent contradiction, however, disappears once we realise the significance of gender. The “mimes” are human, but not “men:” they represent, of course, women. As a conventional apocalypse, it is impossible, as we have seen, to reduce the poem to sense; as a feminist apocalypse, it makes perfect sense. According to this reading, then, the “mimes” would represent the subaltern position of women in a patriarchal society, and the “worm” the male tyrant, that is, the femicide.

Indeed, these overtones cannot be deemed irrelevant in a tale dealing with the death of two women, narrated by a very cagey male, and fraught with disturbing hints of murder. Indeed, some critics have posited a more direct connection between the poem and the plot of “Ligeia.” Susan Amper mentions Joan Dayan and Yaohua Shi, who have “read the poem as a foreshadowing of Rowena’s death,” but argues that this interpretation is not viable:

The problem remains in explaining how Ligeia can have guessed so precisely the circumstances of Rowena’s death. Among her mental gifts, the ability to tell the future was never mentioned. Rather, she is reporting her own experience of sexual violence and murder at the hands of her husband. Her poem is a bill of indictment, composed in the hope that her drama (...) “shall not be forgot!” (...) The Phantom is the murdering narrator, chased by the threat of exposure; the crowd that “sees it not” could be readers who fail to discover her message in the poem.

(“Masters of Deceit” 131-32)

Implied in this passage, of course, is the idea that the poem is an allegory of the reading of the mystery tale itself to which it has been grafted. Indeed, it appears to me that the poem is a

prophecy of the implied dénouement of “Ligeia,” that is, of the uncovering of Ligeia’s true story by the reader. The precise meaning of the allegory, however, is established by reference to Radcliffe’s “shadow of a shade.”

As the reader has no doubt noticed, the situation depicted in the poem has many significant similarities with the country-fair scene in *The Italian*. Both involve a drama performed by “mimes” which only became intelligible after the leading character committed murder. Moreover, the two phases in the public’s reaction to these dramas are perfect analogues of the reader’s response to the tale: the initial perplexity before the mysterious one-man drama performed by the narrator, and the sudden insight incident on the identification of the “shadow of a shade,” which then becomes clearly identifiable with the “Phantom,” making definite sense of Amper’s interpretation of the poem.

The narrator chased after a “phantom,” without being able to “seize” it. The public, convinced that the chase was an allegory of the quest of the Romantic poet for Supernal Beauty and Absolute Truth, followed in his footsteps, and, therefore, could no more grasp the mystery of the story than the narrator. Indeed, his inability to get a hold of the ghost matches his failure to achieve the full knowledge of the mystery of Ligeia: he “felt it approaching—felt it approaching—yet (...) at length entirely depart” (Poe, “Ligeia” 314). Likewise, the reader also intuits a vague sort of half-sense—the cosmical allegory—which is not entirely consistent with the drama performed by the narrator of the tale or Ligeia’s poem, and which supplies the place of literal meaning in a situation where this does not seem practicable. Yet, we, the readers, can never shake the feeling that the apparent meaning does not quite add up. And so, the “circle” of misunderstanding must ultimately be broken. This is Ligeia’s prophecy. In terms of the diegesis, she obscurely predicts that her husband will involuntarily reveal his crime. Thus read, her poem intimates also her awareness of her husband’s exhibitionism, which is, indeed, one of his most distinctive features.

Poe's allusion to Radcliffe's "shadow of a shade" is emblematic of his unconventional use of the intertext, which is, in a sense, quite the opposite of that described by Michael Riffaterre in "Paragramme et signifiante." According to this critic, what distinguishes the literary text from other modalities of discourse is the presence of "incohérences déictiques de la signifiante," that is, antithetical statements for which "il n'y a pas de visualisation possible:"

La dérivation du texte à partir d'une donnée sémantique élimine la référence des mots aux choses et la ramplace par la référence des mots à un système de mots ou à un système sémique situé en dehors du texte. (...) Quand le lecteur, docile à la séquence lexicale, cesse de lire en fonction de référents non verbaux, et qu'il lit en fonction du paragramme sémantique, la coupure s'efface ou plutôt écarts et solutions de continuité sont perçus comme signes que les référents verbaux ne sont plus dans le texte même, mais dans l'intertexte" (Riffaterre, "Paragramme" 80, 82-83).

The phrase "shadow of a shade" in "Ligeia" is indeed made salient by the apparent impossibility of reducing it to a concrete, literal meaning. In other words, the common semantic mechanism of reference appears to collapse, and this effectively prompts the reader to seek its reference in the intertext, rather than visualise the scene being described. Thus, the buried allusion functions as "le mot inducteur du paragramme" (Riffaterre, "Paragramme" 75).

However, in Poe's text, the allusion doubles back on itself. That is, instead of leading, as one would expect, away from the text, broadening its semantic possibilities by generalisation, it actually leads the reader back to it, providing clues for the concrete meaning the reader is bound to miss at first. In this case, the appeal to the intertext re-establishes the link between words and things, intimating a solution that requires, precisely, that one visualises the scene depicted in the tale. Indeed, the narrator himself keeps pointing toward the same spot, the middle of his bridal chamber, thereby enabling the reader to form a very precise mental picture of the decisive moments of the tale: "From out the most central recess of this melancholy vaulting, depended (...) a huge censer,"

he recalls; later, the faint “shadow of a shade” appears on that very same spot; later still, on the fateful night of the return of Ligeia, he vainly searches for the shadow there; finally, later that same night, the enshrouded Ligeia advances to “the middle of the apartment” (Poe, “Ligeia” 321, 325 329). Thus, that allusiveness that we are used, even trained, to recognise as a sign of the collapse of the mechanism of reference in poetry, becomes in Poe’s method, an instrument of misdirection, which disguises the precisely coded literal meaning of the shadow and the equally precise meaning of the allusion. Thus, meaning is, in a sense, reinstated, and the text’s ability to convey it affirmed, in the face of the typical Romantic rhetoric of the narrator.

At first, then, we assume the tale is one of genuine supernatural, hence, that the reader is required temporarily to suspend disbelief in order to appreciate it. The text, however, forces us to conclude that the narrator was himself suspending disbelief, therefore, that the tale is one of delusion. Nevertheless, the narrator remains a viable representation of the creative process as the great English Romantic poets conceived it. Wordsworth’s theory of poetry as a sort of controlled delusion is particularly relevant in this context. In his famous preface to the third edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1802—and which was an expanded version of the preface to the second edition of 1800—he maintained that the poet was a man—indeed, for Wordsworth the poet seems to be always a “man”—who evinced “a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present;” and who “has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement” (Preface 256).

But, as long as the poet is making a deliberate effort to get out of himself, he is also acutely aware of his own situation. Therefore, the creative mood, as Wordsworth conceived it, is always fundamentally distinct from a real trance. Still, Wordsworth wistfully adds: “it will be the wish of

the Poet (...) for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion and even confound and identify his own feelings with” those of his characters (Wordsworth, Preface 256).

Inherent in Wordsworth’s theory is the idea that it is impossible for a poet to be deluded in this way. The word “wish” is decisive here. The poet makes a conscious effort of depersonalisation, but remains lucid—otherwise, he would not be able to arrange his thoughts into a poem. Inasmuch as it is an intellectual effort, poetic creation requires the poet to be aware of his situation. It requires, that is, a certain level of detachment. Wordsworth’s poet, however, wishes he could somehow forget himself, and believe he really was in the situations he imagines even while he writes; he wishes, that is, that he could believe that the “absent things” he imagines were really before him instead of a sheet of paper. In other words, he wishes poetic creation were not an act of will, but the result of unconscious elaboration. This sentiment defines the Romantic attitude. The idea of striving after the impossible synthesis of objective and subjective, feeling and emotion is, at least, the common ground shared by the great English Romantics, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley.

Poe’s calculating, mischievous approach to fiction has, in fact, much more in common with the Gothic. Walpole illustrates the enormous chasm that separates the Gothic trickster from the Romantic visionary: whereas the latter wanted to believe the illusions he produced, the former merely intended to make the reader believe this illusion. In his insightful introduction to *The Castle of Otranto*, Walter Scott demonstrates how the prose romance he helped to codify and popularise was no more than an updated form of the Gothic. Indeed, Scott’s essay is, I think, the missing link between Poe and the Gothic:<sup>120</sup> “The reader, who is required to admit the belief of supernatural interference understands precisely what is demanded of him; and, if he be a gentle reader, throws his mind into the attitude best adapted to humour the deceit which is presented for his entertainment, and grants, for the time of perusal, the premises on which the fable depends” (Introduction 11).

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120 For a recent discussion of the influence of Scott’s essay on Poe’s criticism see Sean Moreland’s “Ancestral Piles: Poe’s Gothic Materials.”

One can easily mistake this with the “wiling suspension of disbelief for the moment” which Coleridge thought was required of the reader of a supernatural story (*Biographia Literaria* 2:6). In reality, however, Scott clearly intimates that the writer of romances should force readers to assume this frame of mind, for example, by deftly exploiting their emotions. Thus, according to him, Walpole’s object had been to “to wind up the feelings of his reader till they became for a moment identified with those of a ruder age,” in which belief in the supernatural was wide-spread (Scott, Introduction 10).

In his second review of *Twice-Told Tales*, as we have seen, Poe wrote: “During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” ([1842] 572). This sentence clearly betrays the influence of Scott’s theory of the “romance” on Poe’s critical thought. Not only does he agree with Scott on the basic effect to be wrought by the prose romance, he also agreed with him on the means best adapted to produce it. Scott likens the experience of reading a horror story in this style to that of spending the night alone in a lonesome Gothic chamber—indeed, he maintains that the object of such stories is to recreate in words that experience:

He who, in early youth, has happened to pass a solitary night in one of the few ancient mansions which the fashion of more modern times has left undespoiled of their original furniture, has probably experienced, that the gigantic and preposterous figures dimly visible in the defaced tapestry, the remote clang of distant doors which divide him from living society, the deep darkness which involves the high and fretted roof of the apartment, the dimly-seen pictures of ancient knights, renowned for their valour, and perhaps for their crimes, the varied and indistinct sounds which disturb the silent desolation of a half-deserted mansion; and, to crown all, the feeling that carries us back to ages of feudal power and papal superstition, join together to excite a corresponding sensation of supernatural awe, if not terror. It is in such situations, when superstition becomes contagious, that we listen with respect, and even with

dread, to the legends which are our sport in the garish light of sun-shine, and amid the dissipating sights and sounds of every-day life. Now it seems to have been Walpole's object to attain (...) that same association which might prepare his reader's mind for the reception of prodigies congenial to the creed and feelings of the actors. (...) in short, the scene, the performers, and action, so far as it is natural, form the accompaniments of his spectres and his miracles, and have the same effect on the mind of the reader that the appearance and drapery of such a chamber as we have described may produce upon a temporary inmate. (Scott, Introduction 9)

By insulating the reader, then, the writer of supernatural thrillers attempts to create an experience in which superstition is "contagious." This is another idea that appears to have filtered into Poe's criticism. In "The Philosophy of Composition," furthering a conception he had already outlined in his criticism of Hawthorne, he wrote: "that a close *circumscription of space* is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident:—it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention, and, of course, must not be confounded with mere unity of place" (Poe, 67).

Indeed, confinement to an awe-inspiring Gothic atmosphere serves, in Scott's description, the same purpose that Poe assigns to his "circumscription:" that of keeping the reader insulated, preventing "the dissipating sights and sounds of everyday life," as Scott had put it, or, in the alternative formulation Poe used in his 1842 review of *Twice-Told Tales*, "worldly interests" from interfering with the intended effect (572). In other words, the atmosphere of the tale was meant to lull "*la raison froide*, that cold common sense, which," Scott writes, Walpole "justly deemed the greatest enemy of the effect which he hoped to produce" (Introduction 12). It is no coincidence that Rowena's bedroom should so resemble Scott's Gothic room.

But like Coleridge, Scott thought that to explain the delusions of the characters was to destroy the supernatural effect:



The bold assertion of the actual existence of phantoms and apparitions seems to us to harmonize much more naturally with the manners of feudal times, and to produce a more powerful effect upon the reader's mind, than any attempt to reconcile the superstitious credulity of feudal ages with the philosophical scepticism of our own, by referring those prodigies to the operation of fulminating powder, combined mirrors, magic lanthorns, trap-doors, speaking trumpets, and such like apparatus of German phantasmagoria. (Scott, Introduction 12)

Scott's essay on *Otranto* comes at a very interesting epoch in his career. In 1811, Scott had achieved notoriety as a poet, but had yet to publish the first novel in the *Waverley* series, for which he is best known today. This series is named after his first published novel, which appeared anonymously in 1814. Evidently, Scott was already preparing his career as a novelist. It is curious to note that during the rest of his relatively long and very prolific career he seldom followed the advice he gave novelists in 1811. Many of his novels contain episodes of explained supernatural. *Anne of Geierstein* (1829), which I will be looking at in the following chapter, is a good example. Poe, on his part, evidently used both strategies: he had his narrator assert, or at least clearly intimate his belief in real ghosts, while at the same time including in his tale phantasmagoric devices to which the apparitions could, and should be referred. He did this in many of his tales, but most notably in "Ligeia." The reason why Scott objected to the supernatural explained, is that it worked against the chief effect for which the Gothic thriller was designed, which was to constrain the reader to identify himself momentarily with the superstitious fears of the characters. If the reader knew this explanation, he would rather laugh at their credulity. But Poe managed to circumvent this difficulty by making his explanation hard to detect. The main difference between the way the two writers conceived the Gothic thriller, however, was that while Scott merely strived to deceive the reader, Poe attempts to trick him into sharing, as it were, an *actual* delusion—for, in his tale, the supposedly supernatural events can indeed be shown to be a delusion *of the narrator*.

As Scott saw it, the Gothic was a poetics of delusion which aimed to make the reader forget he was *not* superstitious by all means possible. Poe's narrator, however, supplements the Gothic associations of his medieval chamber with phantasmagoric devices, not to mention chemical stimulants, and ends up slipping, as Wordsworth would say, into an "entire delusion." Evidently, Poe intended to suggest that this was not as difficult as Wordsworth thought, provided one did earnestly wish to believe. Thus, it becomes clear that his narrator is a caricature of the Romantic attitude. The character he assumed for the tale does not merely share the superstition supposedly prevalent in the Middle Ages; he adds to this the "transcendentalism" which Poe regarded as the peculiar superstition of his own age. But Poe knew his character was deluded and, therefore, was no more "transcendentalist" than Walpole was "Gothic." It was only a ruse. It was only fiction. And, unlike Wordsworth, Poe never wished he could forget it.

## 10 — “Far Within the Pupils of my Beloved:” The Metaphor of Depth in Poe

At first glance, “Ligeia” appears a typical expression of the Romantic myth of poetic creation, but this myth is subverted by the reinstatement of literal meaning. This tale, like the rest of Poe’s work, rewards doubt, analysis, and close attention to detail with solutions; it rewards, that is, precisely those habits of thought that Romanticism most distrusted, and which are represented in the tale by the confused narrator. Poe’s version of the Romantic myth also highlights, through hyperbole, its intrinsically patriarchal nature. The male narrator presents Ligeia quite explicitly as the muse by whose mediation he was enabled to get glimpses of the world beyond. Yet, she was the one actually writing poems. Thus, the narrator effectively rewrites Ligeia, subordinating her to his own quest for transcendence.

In “Not a Woman: The Murdered Muse in ‘Ligeia,’” Catherine Carter has attempted to describe the murder of Ligeia in allegorical terms. Building on Matheson’s claim that the first wife was murdered, she writes:

Applied more figuratively to Ligeia as muse, such a reading suggests not only that the narrator’s muse is unusual in her strength of character but that her husband finds such force and authority unnerving; in his own phrase, he is both ‘delighted and appalled’ by what he sees in her eyes. This combination encompasses the narrator’s entire relationship with Ligeia (...). Such, perhaps, is the struggle of the self with submission to vision, of the self with the loss of self that creative work entails.

(Carter, “Not a Woman” 51)

Ultimately, Carter argues against literal interpretation: “It is possible that he [the narrator] does somehow kill his own muse (perhaps through opiates) in a frantic revolt against its dominance and power, but it is equally possible that it is nothing less than her death—her *absence*—which

inspires his greatest resentment. I incline to the latter choice” (“Not a Woman” 51). Thus, as her title indicates, Carter regards Ligeia as “not a woman.”

The irresistible emergence of the literal, however, is a textual fact that cannot be dismissed. This fact vindicates Ligeia, defeating her husband’s attempt of appropriating her legacy. In addition to killing her and defiling her body, under pretence of glorifying the entombed the despotic and pedantic narrator also defaced her memory through innuendo and poisonous compliments, in order thus to assert his own gigantic ego, and with it the status quo of gender. Distorting Ligeia’s words, he presents his case as an illustration of the universal “tragedy” of “man.” Thus, he seeks to create a bond of solidarity between him and his readers that is rooted in a sense of helplessness before fate. But, by reading gender out of the word “man,” he conceals Ligeia’s tragedy, and, by extension, the plight of women in a patriarchal society. Thus, Poe indirectly exposes what Gilbert and Gubar accurately term “our culture’s historical confusion of literary authorship with patriarchal authority” (11).

Indeed, Ligeia’s situation can be seen, more particularly, as a fictional representation of the situation of the female author in a world dominated by men, as Poe himself described it in the opening sentences of a long review of an American anthology of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s early work, *The Drama of Exile, and Other Poems* (1845), published before she married Robert Browning: “‘A well-bred *man*,’ says Sir James Puckle, in his ‘Gray Cap for a Green Head,’ ‘will never give himself the liberty to speak ill of women.’ We emphasize the ‘man.’ Setting aside, for the present, certain rare commentators and compilers of the species G—, —creatures neither precisely men, women, nor Mary Wollstonecraft’s—setting these aside as unclassifiable, we may observe that the race of critics are masculine—men” (1).

Thus, Poe draws attention to the overwhelming “maleness” of the literary establishment, which hopelessly distorts critical responses to works written by women. He argues that, given this disproportion, the word “man” cannot be read as an ungendered term. In order to understand the

political motivations of this “male” criticism, he provokingly suggests, one must read gender back into it. As usual in Poe, such culturally disrupting contents are disguised by his apparent endorsement of the very prejudice he denounces.

Indeed, the passing reference to Mary Wollstonecraft appears contemptuous. It certainly would have appeared so to a conservative reader unsympathetic with her project of female emancipation. She was often perceived as an “unfeminine woman,” or as a sexual freak. In an explanatory note to the passage, Burton R. Pollin quotes Walpole’s famous statement that Wollstonecraft was an “hyena in petticoats,” adding that this was “perhaps Poe’s sole knowledge of her importance to the female movement” (Poe, *Writings in the Broadway Journal* 2:2n1/9). But the context suggests otherwise. Poe is discussing precisely the peculiar plight of women writers like Wollstonecraft. Besides, his remark bespeaks a direct acquaintance with Wollstonecraft’s arguments that most of her detractors lacked. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she had rejected both available gender roles, arguing that men and women were, under existing social conditions, equally irrational, and that both should become more “masculine,” in the sense usually given to the word. Therefore, she saw herself as neither “woman” or “man,” in the senses commonly attached to these terms. In fact, the real object of Poe’s satire appears to have been “G —,” which probably stands for Rufus Griswold.

Poe’s harsh criticism of the irrationalism of some passages in Barrett Browning’s book actually develops a Wollstonecraftian point. He rejects the system of gallantry that prevented most “men” from applying the same standard of excellence to a woman’s poem that was applied to the productions of male poets. It was then the fashion to praise women for their “sensibility,” thus implicitly denying them rationality. Poe, on the other hand, rejects not only the identification of woman with sensibility, but the very ideology of sensibility. Poe wrote at a time when it was the fashion to regard poetry as the expression of “feeling” rather than thought. As we have seen, this created the idea that poetry was not supposed to make sense, but that it should rather expose the

limitations of the understanding by tapping a putative universal human experience of which the poem was supposed to be the imperfect realisation. The best the poet could hope, therefore, was to convey to the reader a glimpse of this ineffable, ultimately unintelligible truth, through indirectness. In his review, Poe rejected this mystical conception of poetry in the strongest terms.

Commenting on the titular poem of the collection, which offers a new take on the Miltonian theme of the Fall, Poe complains of the lack of paraphrasable content, particularly as regards the character of Eve:

It would have been better for Miss Barrett if, throwing herself independently upon her own very extraordinary resources, (...) she had involved her Eve in a series of adventures merely natural, or if not this, of adventures preternatural within the limits of at least a conceivable relation—a relation of matter to spirit and spirit to matter, that should have left room for something like palpable action and comprehensible emotion (...). As the case actually stands, it is only in a few snatches of verbal intercommunication with Adam and Lucifer, that we behold her as a woman at all. For the rest, she is a mystical something or nothing, enwrapped in a fog of rhapsody about Transfiguration, the Seed, and the Bruising of the Heel, and other talk of a nature that no man ever pretended to understand in plain prose (...).

(rev. of *A Drama of Exile* 3)

Then, he singled out some lines of speech of “a Chorus of Invisible Angels addressing Adam” as particularly unintelligible, remarking, however, that this sort of thing met the expectations of the reading public of that era:

Now we do not mean to assert that, by excessive “tension” of the intellect, a reader accustomed to the cant of the transcendentalists<sup>121</sup> (or of those who degrade an ennobling philosophy by styling themselves such) may not succeed in ferreting from

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121 The phrase is an obvious pun on Immanuel Kant, who exerted, through Coleridge, great influence on the transcendentalist movement.

the passage quoted, and indeed from each of the thousand similar ones throughout the book, something that shall bear the aspect of an absolute idea—but we do mean to say first, that, in nine cases out of ten, the thought when dug out will be found very poorly to repay the labor of the digging;—for it is the nature of thought in general, as it is the nature of some ores in particular, to be richest when most superficial. And we do mean to say, secondly, that, in nineteen cases out of twenty, the reader will suffer the most valuable ore to remain unmined to all eternity, before he will be put to the trouble of digging for it one inch. And we do mean to assert, thirdly, that no reader is to be condemned for *not* putting himself to the trouble of digging even the one inch; for no writer has the right to impose any such necessity upon him. What is worth thinking is distinctly thought: what is distinctly thought, can and should be distinctly expressed, or should not be expressed at all. (Rev. of *The Drama of Exile* 3-4)

The “cant of the transcendentalists” had so perverted the expectations of the public, that readers were now more than willing to wring something that looked like an idea from passages that contained none. He thought that Barrett Browning had catered to this preposterous contemporary taste or, as he puts it later in the article, that “[h]er sense of Art” had “been contaminated by pedantic study of false models” (Rev. of *The Drama of Exile* 15). The false critical notions to which Poe alludes are the school of “all Lawlessness” originated by Shelley, “the misplaced didacticism of Wordsworth, and the even more preposterously anomalous metaphysicianism of Coleridge” (14).

The long quotation above depends on a clean-cut distinction between meaning and nonsense which is projected on the metaphor of depth. “Profound” pseudo-ideas, forced on the text by the “transcendentalist” method, are contradistinguished from the kind of intelligible content that may be reduced to prose. Thus, Poe makes a plea for literal meaning, being convinced, however, that this can never find echo in the readership of his time, who is accustomed to take seemingly profound

absurdities as a valid alternative to meaning, which, he tells us, is usually on the “surface,” that is, in the terms of his metaphor, on the text itself, rather than beyond it.

For Yvor Winters, Poe had himself cultivated precisely the sort of “transcendentalism” that he is condemning:

Poe sees truly enough that the enforcement of truth, in itself, does not constitute poetry, and on the basis of that elementary observation he falls into the common romantic error, which may be stated briefly as follows: truth is not poetry; truth should therefore be eliminated from poetry, in the interests of a purer poetry. He would, in short, advise us to retain the attitude, but to discard the object of the attitude. The correct formula, on the other hand, is this: truth is not poetry; poetry is truth and something more. It is the completeness of the poetic experience which makes it valuable. How thoroughly Poe would rob us of all subject matter, how thoroughly he would reduce poetry, from its traditional position, at least when ideally considered, as the act of complete comprehension, to a position of triviality and of charlatanism (...). (“Edgar Allan Poe” 241).

As I have before remarked, I think that Winters is one of the most astute critics that ever dealt with Poe. There are, indeed, many texts in Poe’s work, including, of course, “Ligeia” and “Morella,” in which Poe appears to make the apology of this Romantic attitude, exaggerating it so as to reduce it to a form of delusion or charlatannerie. The problem is, Winters could never conceive that Poe was not serious about his “transcendentalism.” He appears to have thought that a man living in Poe’s time could not help being a Romantic. Thus, Poe’s exaggerated Romanticism appeared to him the perfect illustration of what he regarded as the “common mistake” that was inherent to all Romantic poetry.

It appears to me, however, that Poe’s “transcendentalist” statements are invariably corroded by irony. In particular, they all indirectly enforce the distinction between meaning and nonsense that



underlies the review of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work. Indeed, Poe's basic understanding of poetry appears to have much more in common with the Augustan ideal of perspicuity than it does with the aesthetics of obscurity of the Romantics. His critique of the mystical haziness of Romantic poetry recovers the standard of intelligibility that Alexander Pope (1688-1744) had demanded of poetry in *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), when he complained that the understanding of readers was lulled by music and rhyme, and thus prepared to accept "some unmeaning thing" dull-witted poets "call a thought;" in fact, Pope already denounced the tendency of the reader to value this sort of vague suggestiveness more highly than definite meaning: "As things seem large which we through mists descry, / Dullness is ever apt to magnify" (67).

By truth, Winters means intelligible content. Poe used the word in the same sense. But I do not believe that his depictions of this exaggerated version of Romanticism were ingenuous. In other words, I think that he did not *fall* into the "common romantic error;" on the contrary, I believe he meant to denounce this error. Indeed, like Winters, Poe appears to have been convinced that the error was intrinsic to Romanticism itself, for he appears to have thought that, by striving for "something more," the poet necessarily ended up with something less than meaning.<sup>122</sup> In his review of *A Drama of Exile*, at least, he clearly is making an argument against nonsense in poetry. Milton, the avowed model of the poem, is not spared:

even in Milton's own day, when men had the habit of believing all things, the more nonsensical the more readily, and of worshipping, in blind acquiescence, the most preposterous of impossibilities—even *then*, there were not wanting individuals who would have read the great epic with more zest, could it have been explained to their satisfaction, how and why it was, not only that a snake quoted Aristotle's ethics, and

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122 Margarida Vale de Gato, in her doctoral thesis "Edgar Allan Poe em Translação: entre textos e sistemas, visando as rescritas na lírica moderna em português," describes Winters's essay on Poe as "mais uma batalha na guerra travada por este crítico contra o anti-racionalismo na poesia," citing it as a particular instance of the New Critics' contempt for Poe (115n1). Regarding the New Critics attitude toward Poe, she remarks that, considering the way in which Poe's theory of poetry foreshadows twentieth-century formalism: "não deixa de causar perplexidade o facto de os *New Critics* anglo-saxónicos verem na poesia de Poe um exercício de obscuridade deliberada que mina a auto-suficiência do poema" (115).

behaved otherwise pretty much as he pleased, but that bloody battles were continually being fought between bloodless “innumerable angels,” that found no inconvenience in losing a wing one minute and a head the next, and if pounded up into puff-paste late in the afternoon, were as good ‘innumerable angels’ as new the next morning, in time to be at *reveillé* roll-call: And now—at the present epoch—there are few people who do not occasionally *think*. This is emphatically the thinking age; —indeed it may very well be questioned whether mankind ever substantially thought before. (Rev. of *The Drama of Exile* 4)

Nothing could be less Romantic than the emphasis Poe here places on “thinking.” Poe demands of poetry strict intelligibility—indeed, he spends most of his review vindicating Barrett Browning from the imputation of obscurity. She had become involved in absurdities, but Poe thought this was a consequence of her choice of theme, and of the influence of mistaken “transcendentalism.” But Milton had been no less absurd, nor was his absurdity more excusable, Poe thought. Incidentally, the irony of the compliment Poe pays his own age is obvious. With his tongue in his cheek, Poe tells us that in his day people did think *on occasion*. He also points out that even in Milton’s supposedly unenlightened age some people had been known to think. Thus, in effect, he implies the world had not changed materially.

In the end, the image Poe gives us of Elizabeth Barret Browning is not too flattering. But he remained true to his opening statement. He rejected the irrational tendency of her poetry, but refused to excuse what he regarded as its defects with her sex. For him, poetry was an art, that is, an intellectual product. However, a “school” had been established “if that absurd term must still be employed—a school—a system of rules—upon the basis of the Shelley who had none” (Poe, rev. of *A Drama of Exile* 14). This “school” conceived of poetry as an intuitive, mostly extra-rational pursuit. But for Poe, the effectiveness of Shelley’s poetry was not due to “sensibility,” but rather to his intuitive grasp of the rules of the art. Still, for this “school” to reach a perfection which Poe

tacitly construes as chimerical, the “abandon” of Shelley, as he calls it, would have to be combined with “the most profound instinct of Art, and the sternest Will properly to blend and vigorously to control all” (15).

This sense of Art, and ability to confer a coherent form to a poem, of course, were then generally associated with maleness. But Poe indirectly grants these qualities on Barrett Browning. He also accuses her of having been intimidated by the received ideas of gender: “Her sense of Art is pure in itself,” he tells us, but she did not trust it; she studied “false models,” meaning Shelley and his imitators, “a study which has the more easily led her astray, because she placed an undue value upon it as rare—as alien to her character of woman” (rev. of *A Drama of Exile* 15). This is certainly an unusual thing for a male critic of his time to say, as Poe himself had pointed out in the beginning of his essay. Although he is never straightforward, Poe never fails to confound the Romantic expectations of his readership. In this case, he blocks the common Romantic association of “transcendentalist” poetry with “man.”

Within the framework of the Romantic myth of creation, indeed, women and poets were described in similar terms. Poets, at least considered in that capacity, were not expected to think—not in the proper, full sense of the word; like women, they were supposed to be endowed with an exquisite sensibility, and an intuitive perception of absolute Truth, which was defined by contrast with the truths the understanding could grasp. Yet, and paradoxically, it was also thought that great poetic achievements required abstract thought, and a sort of deliberateness that were generally regarded as male prerogatives.

This was not the only text where Poe exaggerated the common Romantic rhetoric to highlight the paradox in the conception of gender on which it was built. In the *Broadway Journal* for December 27, 1845, Poe transcribed an obituary of the American poet Maria Brooks (b. 1794) from *The Boston Courier* which reported that Charles Lamb could not believe her *Zophiel* had been written by a woman. Poe replied that “Lamb had little understanding of the true nature of Poetry—

which, appealing especially to our sense of Beauty, is, in its very essence, feminine. If the greatest poems have not been written by women, it is because, the greatest poems have not been written at all” (Poe, Obituary of Maria Brooks, 357-58). Although apparently conforming to the ideology of “sentiment,” Poe pushes it to absurdity, in the same way that he exaggerated “transcendentalism.”

Critics patronised women writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning by measuring their achievements against an inferior standard of intelligence and artistic mastery. Thus, it was assumed from the outset that they were constitutionally unable to compete with men on an equal footing. This rhetoric of sentimentality provided a justification for the system of gallantry that reiterated the prejudice against women, and enforced gender inequality. Poe’s ironic rejection of this rhetoric, on the other hand, brought into question the ideology that was inherent to that system. The outlook implied by Poe’s review of Barrett Browning’s work is, indeed, strictly rationalist, or, to be more precise, “intellectualist.”

Poe evidently believed that women had the same potential for reason that men, or in other words, they were capable of thinking, in the proper sense of the word. Incidentally, the exposure of the obtuseness of the narrators of “Ligeia” and “Morella” comes with the realisation that they had only excelled women by force or by the power society gave them over them—in that sense, they were the perfect representatives of male tyranny, as it had been described by Wollstonecraft and, indirectly, by Radcliffe’s novels. But, since this sentiment was illegible, or at the very least unprintable, he often expressed himself in riddles, like the women writers of the Victorian period whose works Gilbert and Gubar analyse in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. The murder of Ligeia remained hidden because the public did not heed the obvious signs of the narrator’s resentment for his wife’s intellectual supremacy. This resentment is evidently rooted in a feeling of male superiority. This is something that would remain hidden for as long as the word “man” could be employed to render women invisible. It is interesting to note, in this regard, that his review of

Barrett Browning's poetry was published in January 1845, scarcely a month before "The Conqueror Worm" was included in "Ligeia" for the first time.

Significantly, Poe ostensibly avoided in his review of *A Drama of Exile* the gallant clichés his narrator employs to belittle his wife by puffing her beyond humanity. Instead of praising Barrett Browning for her sensibility, and enthusiasm, according to the common practice, he upbraids her for following the trends. In other words, he thought Barrett was an artist, that is, that she was capable of controlling her medium, but also that she was guilty of palming absurdities on the public. But he did not say she was absurd *because* she was a woman; or, what would have amounted to the same thing, that "sensibility" supplied her inability to think clearly. Although this might appear condescending to contemporary audiences, it is certainly a marked departure from the tone of most of the criticism of the time. In fact, Poe's implied feminism is not very different in spirit from the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and other early feminist philosophers, whose thought is usually described by modern critics as "liberal feminism." These writers also insisted that women and man possessed the same potential for reason.

One of the reasons why most critics did not take Poe's "intellectualism" seriously is the fact that he often adds some surprising exception to his uncompromising demand for meaning in literature. His review of *A Drama of Exile* is a good example:

Nevertheless, there is no more appropriate opportunity than the present for admitting and maintaining, at once, what has never before been either maintained or admitted—that there is a justifiable exception to the rule for which we contend. It is where the design is to convey the fantastic—not the obscure. To give the idea of the latter we need, as in general, the most precise and definitive terms, and those who employ other terms but confound obscurity of expression with the expression of obscurity. The fantastic in itself, however, —phantasm—may be materially furthered in its

development by the *quaint* in phraseology: —a proposition which any moralist may examine at his leisure for himself. (Rev. of *The Drama of Exile* 4)

This passage partakes of that oracular quality that peculiarly distinguishes much of Poe's criticism. Yet, his meaning is not as esoteric as it might seem. In effect, he contends that repetitive, nonsensical expressions are not necessarily meaningless. They may be brought to bear by an overriding conception. In particular, they may be used to convey the idea of the "fantastic," a term he traces to its etymological sense: phantasm.

He made a similar movement in many other critical and theoretical texts. In a very well-known article of the *Marginalia*, included in the fifth instalment of the series, published in March 1846 in *Graham's* magazine (M 150, in Pollin's edition), for example, Poe stated:

I do not believe that any thought, properly so called, is out of the reach of language. I fancy, rather, that where difficulty in expression is experienced, there is, in the intellect which experiences it, a want either of deliberateness or of method. For my own part, I have never had a thought which I could not set down in words, with even more distinctness than that with which I conceived it. (*Brevities* 258)

In the rest of the article, however, Poe appears to recant, or qualify, his initial assertion, describing an alternative mode of conveying "vague" thoughts, which were *not* really thoughts, by a language that was *not* really expression. This is the sort of statement often presented by Poe's critics as constituting irrefutable evidence that Poe was a typical, albeit extreme representative of Romanticism. While mainstream Romantics were contented to have some meaning, Poe implies that only through utter meaninglessness can a writer convey these inexpressibly vague ideas to the reader's mind. Winters thought that Poe thus reduced Romanticism to nonsense. This is undeniable.

But Poe's palinode is evidently not meant to be taken seriously:

There is, however, a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are *not* thoughts, and to which, *as yet*, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language. I use

the word *fancies* at random, and merely because I must use *some* word; but the idea commonly attached to the term is not even remotely applicable to the shadows of shadows in question. They seem to me rather psychal than intellectual.

(*Brevities* 258)

Most critical readings of this passage and similar passages in Poe fail to realise its radical irony—just as most critical readings of “Ligeia” failed to detect the shadow. Some critics have argued, for example, that this kind of prose was a deliberate illustration of the idea of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.<sup>123</sup> But surely, it is one thing to recognise that the relationship between words and things is a matter of convention and another to choose words *at random*, as Poe pretends to do here. A writer who employs such processes does not expect to be understood. We may suppose him to be attempting other forms of communication that do not rely on the understanding, as the Symbolists would do later in the nineteenth century, and the Surrealists early in the following century. But then, Poe is obviously not using words at random.

The rest of the article contains a preposterously absurd theory purporting to describe a process to induce a sort of ecstasy that would enable a poet to embody those “shadowy” conceptions which were too indefinite to even deserve the name of “fancies:”

They arise in the soul (alas, how rarely!) only at its epochs of most intense tranquillity—when the bodily and mental health are in perfection—and at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams. I am aware of these “fancies” only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so. I have satisfied myself that this condition exists but for an inappreciable *point* of time—yet it is crowded with these “shadows of shadows;” and for absolute *thought* there is demanded time’s *endurance*.

(*Brevities* 258)

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123 Michael J. S. Williams’s *A World of Words: Language and Displacement in the Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe* is perhaps the most developed statement of this position.

Apparently, Poe is glossing the well-known Romantic trope of the poet's striving after the unattainable, and gloriously failing. Indeed, this has generally been taken as one of Poe's most sincere statements of his aims as a poet. But, as usual, this interpretation requires us to dismiss his meaning. One must remember that Poe began by saying that he had never tried to embody these "shadows" in words, effectively claiming, therefore, that he had been always aware of a meaning in everything he *had* actually attempted. This was written at a time, March 1846, when most of Poe's work had already been published. Therefore, although it certainly is true that Poe's words capture the Romantic ethos, in reality, he is actually denying any of the work he had published so far had been written in that spirit. In other words, he intimates he had never been sincere about his Romanticism.

If sincere, however, this statement would mean that, Poe was about to convert himself to "transcendentalism." This would be suspicious in itself, but Poe is actually taking this "transcendentalism" to absurd extremes, emphasising the absolute impossibility of the enterprise he humorously proposes in a way that makes it perfectly clear, I think, he had no intention to mend his ways.<sup>124</sup> In what sense can a "condition" be said to "exist" in a "*point* of time" with no duration? And even if this could be conceived, how could the author have "satisfied" himself of its existence? This condition is positively a *non*-existence. The humour in Poe's use of the phrase "absolute *thought*" depends on this fact. The "transcendentalist" tone would seem to require the idealist sense of the adjective. This tone, as usual, induces the reader to overlook the sense actually required by

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124 Poe would later indirectly confirm that his text enforces an "intellectualist" stance in the opening lines of the poem "To — —," first published in March 1848: "Not long ago, the writer of these lines, / In the mad pride of intellectuality, / Maintained the 'power of words' — denied that ever / A thought arose within the human brain / Beyond the utterance of the human tongue; / And now, as if in mockery of that boast, / Two words (...) / Have stirred from out the abysses of his heart, / Unthought-like thoughts that are the souls of thought / (...) The pen falls powerless from my shivering hand. / With thy dear name as text, though bidden by thee, / I cannot write — I cannot speak or think, / Alas, I cannot feel" (Poe, *Poems* 407-8).

The poem was written for Marie Louise Shew, whose name is omitted in the printed version of the poem. In his notes, Mabbott remarks that the "reference here is clearly to a passage" in *Marginalia* number 150 (although his note incorrectly refers it as number 149), the text from which I have been quoting. Of course, if Poe had really been sincere about that article, the reference would be absurd. In reality, Poe does in the poem exactly what he had done in the *Marginalia*. Since he tells us that the feeling excited by the dedicatee's name makes him powerless to "write," to "think," and even to "feel," it follows that the poem is also *not* an attempt to express the "unthought-like thoughts" he mentions. Thus, the poem is, like the note in the *Marginalia*, an intellectual product.



the context: this whatchamacallits of his, despite resembling what the typical Romantic idealism of his time termed “absolute thoughts,” or ideas, are, *strictly speaking*, not “thoughts” *at all*. In fact, the phrase appears here in precisely the sense in which Poe had employed it in his review of Barrett Browning’s poetry, where he maintained that the readers educated in “the cant of the transcendentalists” were perfectly willing to force “something that shall bear the aspect of an absolute idea” on nonsensical, or “quaint” passages (rev. of *A Drama of Exile* 3). Thus, by making it clear that such nebulous conceptions are not thoughts, Poe cheats such readers of their expectations. In a way, of course, this makes perfect sense: it takes a non-existent text to express a non-existing thought.

This is made even more apparent in the following paragraph, in which Poe describes the state of enthusiasm in which he claims to have “experienced” these “fancies:”

I regard the visions, even as they arise, with an awe which, in some measure, moderates or tranquilizes the ecstasy—I so regard them, through a conviction (which seems a part of the ecstasy itself) that this ecstasy, in itself, is of a character supernal to the Human Nature—is a glimpse of the spirit’s outer world; and I arrive at this conclusion—if this term is at all applicable to instantaneous intuition—by a perception that the delight experienced has, as its element, but *the absoluteness of novelty*. I say the absoluteness—for in these fancies—let me now term them psychal impressions—there is really nothing even approximate in character to impressions ordinarily received. It is as if the five senses were supplanted by five myriad others alien to mortality. (*Brevities* 258)

This does not make any sense. But then, neither does it pretend to make any. The tautological nature of this passage is heightened by pleonasm and hesitation. This is certainly inexcusably bad prose; the kind of thing that led Eliot, Winters, Bloom, and many others, to disparage Poe as an incompetent writer. But this passage is so outrageously inane, so ostensibly

absurd, as to make it impossible to take it seriously. Besides, Poe's nonsense is fraught with meaning. With this terrible prose, Poe hints his disdain for the illogical train of argument he is pursuing, or more precisely, for the conception of poetry of which it is a no doubt deliberate parody.

Let us weigh his words carefully here. Now, the writer's belief in the authenticity of this "ecstasy" is part of the "ecstasy" itself. Poe could not make it any clearer, I think, that faith supplied the absence of "absolute thought," and, therefore, that the expectation of depth, to use one of his favorite metaphors, was self-confirming. Thus, he also reiterates that these "fancies," or "shadows of shadows," or "psychal impressions" had no intellectual content whatsoever, and, consequently, that whatever was required to form even a shadowy conception of them was *not* thinking. In fact, he tells us that one would have to completely abstain from thinking to accept them.

Poe thus humorously suggests that he had got himself into a trance, while, at the same time emphasising its impossibility. Evidently, this trance *never* took place—which is precisely what he had been telling us. He does not mean to say that he did actually embody the "shadows in question" in any of his work—a feat he describes as an absolute impossibility. "I mean to say, merely, that now I can be sure, when all circumstances are favourable, of the supervention of the condition, and feel even the capacity of inducing or compelling it:—the favourable circumstances, however, are not the less rare—else had I compelled, already, the Heaven into the Earth" (*Brevities* 259). The sheer enormity of Poe's hyperbole is enough to destroy what little credibility remained. If Poe, or anyone else for that matter, ever achieved to express such "fancies," the world would surely come to an end.

However, although this evidently would never come to pass, he states that he did "not altogether despair of embodying in words at least enough of the fancies in question to convey, to certain classes of intellect, a shadowy conception of their character;"

nothing can be more certain than that even a partial record of the impressions [he purports to have obtained, for lack of a better word, through his hypnagogic method]

would startle the universal intellect of mankind, by the *supremeness of the novelty* of the material employed, and of its consequent suggestions. In a word—should I ever write a paper on this topic, the world will be compelled to acknowledge that, at last, I have done an original thing. (Poe, *Brevities* 259)

The irony could not be more palpable, and it is evidently not of the “Romantic” variety. Poe here suggests that this impossible paper, that he explicitly denies ever having attempted to write, would be the first original thing he did in his career, thus slighting all he ever wrote, and, indeed, all that he or anyone else could ever hope to write. To my mind, Poe makes it impossible for us to imagine he was serious. Poe never did this *thing*, and he thought that no one could, however, it was perfectly possible to convey a “shadowy conception” of these impossible non-ideas to a certain kind of reader. Evidently, he alludes to those readers who he claimed could extract “something” that looked like but was not an “idea” from Milton’s and Barrett Browning’s mystical nonsense.

But, while in those cases there remained something that could be construed as a meaning, Poe’s text is utterly and ostensibly absurd. His contention that only by straining the “intellect” beyond its capacity could readers get something that *appeared* a meaning out of language that had none, implies, by contrast, the idea which Pope expressed with the utmost terseness in the following verse from *An Essay on Criticism*: “Would all but stoop to what they understand,” Pope wrote (*Essay* 60).<sup>125</sup> This is precisely what the typical Romantic poet could never accept.

Throughout this dissertation I have employed the term “Romanticism” in a fairly loose sense, which corresponds roughly to what Yvor Winters understood by the term. I employ it to refer to a school of writers that refused to settle for a relative knowledge obtained through the means of rational empirical inquiry. Instead, these writers sought to momentarily turn off the understanding, as it were, in order to get a distant glimpse of the grander, absolute, inexpressible Truth, while in a

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125 The April 1846 installment of the *Marginalia* contained a note which mentioned Pope specifically, apropos of a witticism by Voltaire: “That Pope was a fool, indeed, seems to be an established point, at present, with the Crazy-ites—what else shall I call them?” (Poe, *Brevities* 268). Poe used “Crazy-ites” as a term of abuse for the American “transcendentalists” of the Brook Farm group (see Pollin’s note to the text).

sort of ecstasy in which they were, in a greater or lesser degree, abstracted from everyday reality, and, in a sense, even from themselves. Poetry thus understood was not an art, but an act of mystical communion. Wordsworth's preface to the third edition of *Lyrical Ballads* perfectly captures this spirit: "the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our invisible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge: it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science" (259).

Considering most critics have taken Poe's visionary theory seriously, it is not at all surprising that he never got much respect outside the small but dedicated group of his admirers. After resisting him for many years, Harold Bloom, in the introduction to Susan Amper's *How to Write About Edgar Allan Poe* (2008), reluctantly admits that Poe is "permanent and inescapable" because his tales "dream universal nightmares;" they are "myths" (vii-viii).<sup>126</sup> Their value, therefore, lies in the depths; their surface he regards as utterly worthless. "The first principle," he declares, "in writing about Poe is never to discuss how badly he performed in both prose and verse;" his tales "do not sustain being read aloud" and his poems are "paced like a metronome" (vii). For his part, he confesses: "I still resort to French and German translations when I am compelled to read Poe's tales, and I avoid the poems" (viii). But even Bloom has to admit that "his flaws in diction" are not what one would expect of a man of Poe's intelligence (Bloom calls it "cognitive sophistication") (viii). I would go so far as to say Poe was evidently too clever for most of his diction.

In fact, Poe used absurdity to convey an intelligible meaning—a satirical meaning—as we have seen, in *Marginalia* number 150, and the review of *A Drama of Exile*, but also in his fiction. This is very clearly indicated by his "How to Write a Blackwood Article," published in November 1838 in the same magazine, the *Baltimore American Museum*, in which the first published version of "Ligeia" had appeared two months previously. In this tale, Poe has Mr. Blackwood himself

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<sup>126</sup> Another writer who has also proved an embarrassment to critics is Matthew Lewis, whose case, I think, has very significant affinities with Poe's case. Most of his critics, although begrudgingly recognising his notoriety, have felt that Lewis was artistically insignificant and lacked a sense of taste: "Over a period of more than a century and a half the general course of criticism directed at Lewis' romance has been praise, excoriation, contempt, and the patronizing interest bestowed upon a curiosity, but the world has refused to let *The Monk* die" (*A Life* 37).

explain the rules of the trade to the aspirant magazinist Psyche Zenobia. One can either do what “our best novelists” do, and employ the “tone elevated, diffusive, and interjectional,” which consists in keeping words “all in a whirl, like a humming top, and make a noise very similar, which answers remarkably well instead of meaning. This is the best of all possible styles where the writer is in too great a hurry to think;” or else employ the “tone metaphysical:” “If you know any big words this is your chance for them. Be sure and abuse a man named Locke. (...) when you let slip anything a little *too* absurd, (...) just add a foot-note, and say that you are indebted for the above profound observation to the ‘*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*,’ or to the ‘*Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft*;” finally, one may also resort to “the tone transcendental,” “the merit” of which “consists in seeing into the nature of affairs a great deal farther than anybody else. (...) A little reading of the ‘Dial’ will carry you a great way. (...) Put in something about the Supernal Oneness. (...) Above all, study innuendo. Hint every thing—assert nothing” (Poe, “How to Write” 341-42).

In addition, Blackwood advised Zenobia to always write from experience, as this was valued highly by the public. Zenobia faithfully carried out Blackwood’s suggestions in “A Predicament,” a riotous tale in which the author recounts how she had, quite literally, lost her head. As Susan Amper remarks, “[w]ithin a year of the appearance of ‘How to Write a Blackwood Article,’ Poe brought out ‘Ligeia’ and ‘Usher:’ two tales that follow to the letter the formula he derided” (“Masters of Deceit” 105). In fact, it may be argued that in most of his serious tales, he gets into the character of a writer who has either no time or no inclination to think, employing both the “humming top” technique, the verbose, allusion-laden “metaphysical tone,” and the “tone transcendental,” all at the same time.

He used these techniques, as he has Blackwood suggest, to disguise the absurdity of his text. Yvor Winters, who, like Bloom, could not stomach Poe’s diction, found many examples of terrible prose and verse in his works. He quoted the following examples from “Ligeia” and “Morella,” respectively, which he thought spoke for themselves: “‘Where were the souls of the haughty family of the bride , when through thirst of gold, they permitted to pass the threshold of an apartment so

bedecked, a maiden and a daughter so beloved?;’ ‘Morella’s erudition was profound. As I hope to live, her talents were of no common order—her powers of mind were gigantic’” (qtd in Winters, “Edgar Allan Poe” 258-59). Poe’s verse, he thought, was even worse than his prose: “We are met on every page of his poetry with resounding puerilities such as the ‘pallid bust of Pallas,’ and ‘the viol, the violet, and the vine’” (259). “This,” he concludes, “is an art to delight a servant girl” (259). I think that such examples are indeed indefensible. Bloom was of the same opinion, but granted that: “If his [Poe’s] appeal were only to the subliterate, it would by now be over” (Bloom, Introduction viii emphasis mine). Winters, however, almost hits on what I think is the solution to the problem. It is certainly wonderful that anyone could ever have taken such stuff seriously; it is downright preposterous to think *Poe* took it seriously.

He deliberately perpetrated this terrible prose and verse as a parody of the literature of his time. In fact, the prose of Poe’s narrators is often not only stylistically unsound, and as absurd as Poe’s disquisition on “psychal impressions,” in some cases, it is incorrect. Perhaps the most remarkable example of this is the following passage in “Morella,” where the narrator recalls how his wife used to “rake up from the ashes of a dead philosophy some low, singular words, whose strange meaning burned themselves in upon my memory” (Poe 230). The singular name “meaning” does not agree with the plural pronoun “themselves,” which of course renders the sentence ungrammatical. But there can be no doubt that this was what Poe intended. This sentence appeared in the first printed version of “Morella,” in the *Southern Literary Messenger* for April 1835 and, although he revised the text extensively when he prepared the first anthology of his *Tales* (1840), making “[m]any verbal changes,” Poe never altered it (Mabbott, *Tales* 225).

Of course, writers are allowed occasional violations of the rules of grammar for stylistic purposes—this is vulgarly termed poetic license. And since there is very little room to doubt that the deviation was intended by Poe, commentators and editors of his work have intimated, through their silence, that this was not bad English, but syllepsis. But, as Poe himself was in the habit of pointing

out, such deviations from grammatical norm, which he termed in his review of Barrett's *A Drama of Exile* the "quaint in phraseology," are only legitimate when they serve a discernible rhetorical and artistic purpose (4). In this case, however, the deviation appears to be utterly devoid of meaning; at least, of a meaning that *the narrator* could have intended.

From a grammatical as well as a logical standpoint the sentence is simply unjustifiable. It is a mistake. Are we to believe Poe, the merciless "tomahawk man" who never forgave the slightest grammatical fault in others, could overlook such an egregious blunder in a tale he reviewed as carefully as he did "Morella?" This, in itself, would be incredible. But Poe highlighted the blunder so as to make it, I think, impossible to doubt he was aware of the solecism, by adding the adjective "singular" to the name "words." Thus, Poe points out, by contrast, that the name "words" is *plural*, and therefore agrees in number with the pronoun "themselves." The sentence was even more conspicuously absurd in the early incomplete manuscript of the tale (Mabbott's text A): "words whose singular import burned themselves in upon my memory" (Poe, "Morella" 226). Instead of correcting the mistake which the position of the adjective "singular" made perfectly apparent, however, Poe slightly revised his wording to make it a little less obvious.

And so, the conclusion is inescapable. The sentence certainly makes no sense. However, its lack of sense is full of meaning; a meaning that is perfectly in keeping with Poe's overall design. The "meaning," singular, of the "words," plural, should "burn" *itself* in the narrator's mind—this is, without a doubt, what the narrator *meant* to say. But that is not what really happened. The narrator poses as an intellectual. He understood perfectly, of course, all that wonderfully abstruse and profound stuff that his learned wife talked to him about, but his grammar betrays him. It was not the "meaning" that he retained, but only the words themselves (in the third chapter I will trace the tragically embarrassing consequences of his mistake). The narrators of Poe's tales of women invariably end up saying more than they intended, and their lapses are always full of meaning.

Thus, though the sentence is unquestionably bad English, it is stylistically correct. Not according to the common notion of style, of course, but according to Riffaterre's definition. As we have seen, this critic employed the term to designate the author as a textual fact, coded precisely by such deviations from the rules of normal speech as we find again and again in Poe's fiction. Alternatively, such stylistic effects can also be referred to Poe's own theory of the "quaint," a term he employed in his review of *A Drama of Exile* to qualify ungrammatical, illogical statements in poetry, which he said were acceptable providing they were brought to bear by the plot. Specifically, Poe meant to signal that his narrator was one of those readers who confused "shadowy" absurdities with meaning, thereby also providing a perfect specimen of what Mr. Blackwood in the above quoted passage of Poe's eponymous tale termed the "elevated, diffuse, and interjectional" tone.

Harold Bloom and Yvor Winters could not understand how Poe could have had any appeal to anyone but the "subliterate," but I think the previous examples make it clear that their appraisal is based on an incorrect assessment of Poe's aims. The former implies, moreover, that the reason why Poe was revered by the great French-speaking poets Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Valéry was because none of them "had much of an inner ear for English" and, therefore, could not have realised how badly Poe performed linguistically (Bloom, Introduction vii). Baudelaire, of course, is one of those translators that, Bloom implies, rendered Poe's shoddy English into good prose. In reality, the ostensibly bad English of the narrator is there to signal that that character represents precisely the "subliterate." However, Poe's joke is ultimately not on the culturally deprived, but on people like Bloom, who ridiculed Poe for the mistakes of his narrator. Translators like Baudelaire, although they certainly improved Poe's reputation, did not "correct" Poe's style—they erased it, thereby making it impossible for the reader of the translation to realise what Poe really was about.<sup>127</sup> He was not merely following literary trends; he was mocking them.

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<sup>127</sup> Not surprisingly, in translating the sentence in "Morella" I analyse here, Baudelaire completely ironed out the "quaintness" of Poe's original, silently correcting the *narrator's* grammar: "Morella venait, plaçant sa main froide sur la miene et ramassant dans les cendres d'une philosophie morte quelques graves et singulières paroles, qui, par leur sens bizarre, s'incrustaient dans ma mémoire" (Baudelaire, "Morella" 276).



He used botched allusions in his tales in much the same way to intimate the ignorance of his arrogant narrators. Although Poe did in “serious” tales like “Ligeia” exactly what the editor of “How to Write a Blackwood Article” advised the would-be author Psyche Zenobia to do, very few dared question the Romantic “seriousness” of the first of these tales. In “How to Write,” the magazine writer is represented, precisely, as an impostor, who gives him or herself airs to impress an ignorant public by displaying knowledge he does not really possess. “Let us suppose,” Mr. Blackwood tells Zenobia,

now you have determined upon your incidents and tone. The most important portion, — in fact the soul of the whole business, is yet to be attended to – I allude to *the filling up*. It is not to be supposed that a lady or gentleman either has been leading the life of a bookworm. And yet above all things it is necessary that your article have an air of erudition, or at least afford evidence of extensive general reading.

(Poe, “How to Write” 343)

In order to convey this false impression of erudition, the writer should quote some information which “is not generally known, and looks *recherché*” and “give the thing with a downright improviso air” (Poe, “How to Write” 343). For example, by dropping a reference to “*The venerable Chinese novel Ju-Kiao-Li*,” “you will evince your intimate acquaintance with the language and the literature of the Chinese” (344). Thus, Poe highlights the way in which readers are forced to interpret allusions to facts, books, or languages which they ignore. And then, in his apparently “serious” tales, I believe he created allusions that are just a little too obviously erroneous to intimate the narrators also affected a knowledge they did not truly possess.

In “Ligeia” almost every paragraph contains some such very abstruse allusion. Most of them are flawed or incorrect, usually comically so. We have already mentioned how the narrator affected a familiarity with medical matters, and how this was belied by his misconceptions on the subject of corpses. In matters of “general reading” his ignorance is apparently as complete. I will select only

two of many possible examples to illustrate this point. The narrator declares he “sat upon one of the ottomans of India” (Poe, “Ligeia” 324). He alludes to a piece of furniture, a sofa without armrests or back, which was common in the Ottoman Empire—hence the name. The Ottomans, of course, hailed from the region of modern-day Turkey. Their Empire, however, even at its vastest, never reached the Indian sub-continent. Although the phrase “ottomans of India” is not exactly wrong, a person with the narrator’s pretensions to learning certainly should have avoided the absurd coupling of “ottoman” and “of India,” if not for the sake of sense, at least for stylistic reasons.

The next example, however, is not only stylistically incorrect, but downright wrong: “if ever (...) she, the wan and the misty-winged *Ashtophet* of idolatrous Egypt, presided, as they tell, over marriages ill-omened, then most surely she presided over mine” (“Ligeia” 311). This is one of the most abstruse-looking references in the tale. Mabbott, who never conceived such allusions could be intended as anything other than a display of the *author’s* learning, explains that “Ashtophet was, according to Rees’s *Cyclopaedia*, a goddess of the Sidonians. In mythology she has been identified with, or assimilated to, Ashtoreth (...), Astarte, Aphrodite, and eventually Venus” (Mabbott, *Tales* 331n2). Thus, he silently and reverently corrects Poe, who he believes *mistook* the Middle-Eastern goddess with the Egyptian—Isis would be the Egyptian equivalent of the Assyrian Astarte. But neither the British nor the American editions of Rees’s I consulted mention such a spelling, and even the omniscient Google search-engine finds it only in Poe’s tale. Mabbott may have been betrayed by his eagerness to save Poe’s face.<sup>128</sup>

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128 The “deity of the Sidonians, which was worshipped by Solomon in his idolatrous days,” mentioned in Rees’s *Cyclopaedia* (1819) is Astaroth, to which a separate heading is dedicated. The reader is there referred to the entry concerning Astarte, which contains a list of the ancient goddesses of love that have been identified with her: “Astarte was called in Hebrew Astaroth or Ashtaroth. (...) The mythological writers, in general, have thought that Astarte is, under different names, the Venus or Myllita of the Assyrians, the Mythra of the Persians, the Isis of the Egyptians, the Io and Venus Urania of the Greeks, the great goddess of the Syrians, the Derceto of Ascalon, and probably Diana, &c.” The “First American edition,” published in Philadelphia sometime between 1805 and 1825, introduced no alteration to either of the original entries. It would appear that “Ashtophet” was not among the many names by which the goddess was known, and all authorities on mythology I have consulted agree on that point.

All indicates, therefore, that Mabbott made a mistake which, incidentally, Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine perpetuated in their annotated edition of the tale (see *Thirty-Two Stories* 56n3).

If so, his zeal appears to me to be misplaced. The form “Ashtophet” appears to be, not a mistake, but a whimsical coinage, created to imitate a real involuntary mistake. The form is evidently a portmanteau of “Ashtaroht” and the usual transliteration of the Hebrew word for hell: “Tophet,” the ending of which has a certain “Egyptian” ring to it. The strange word was probably designed by Poe to suggest the narrator’s faulty recollection, and insufficient grasp of the matter. The narrator’s “they tell,” indeed, suggests that he had some vague recollection of a goddess of that name, but did not take the trouble of checking the fact—somehow, he never seems to take the trouble of checking his facts. Besides, had this been a mistake, Poe certainly would have corrected it during one of the several extensive revisions to which he subjected “Ligeia.” But he did not—instead, he drew attention to what must, until proven otherwise, be regarded as a *hapax legomenon*.

More importantly, even if “Ashtophet” were mentioned in some hitherto unidentified text, the allusion would remain an obvious mistake, as the Egyptian deity associated with marriage, both happy and unhappy, is Isis, an information Poe and his readers could have found in any number of places. The suggestion that the narrator is confuting Isis with the middle eastern Astarte is reinforced by the reference to wings, for Isis, unlike Astarte, was often represented in Egyptian art with wings. All this indicates, therefore, that “Ashtophet” is, indeed, a lapse, but a purely fictional one. In short, Poe’s narrator had succumbed to a childish urge to show off, and failed miserably—this, I say, appears to be the idea Poe intended to convey.

At times, the chronic reluctance of commentators to admit the obvious irony of some of Poe’s whimsical pseudo-allusions is perplexing. Pollin’s note to *Pinakidia* 80 is a good example. The short article includes the following list of false but widespread etymologies: “Bochart derives Elysium from the Phoenician Elysoth, joy, through the Greek Ηλυσιον” (*Brevities* 55). Pollin admits this “adaptation from H. N. Coleridge’s *Introductions* (...) probably indicates his [Poe’s] sense of humor since the borrowed learning is self-evidently preposterous, although not advanced as such by Coleridge, in citing Samuel Bochart (1590-1667),” an author who was already known for his

“chimerical etymologies” (55n). Surprisingly, Pollin then proceeds to explain, in all seriousness, how Poe himself had derived his spelling of “Elysium” from precisely this etymology, and then betrayed this source by a childish transliteration mistake he never bothered to correct: “The reference to ‘Elysoth’ had been used by Poe in his (...) tale, ‘Shadow,’ and would appear again in ‘Eleonora’ and in his 1844 rev. of Horne’s *Orion*, giving reason enough to think that Poe was deceived by a hasty reading of the Greek word into his spelling Elysium as Helusion, with the capital ‘eta’ wrongly transliterated into ‘He’ and the upsilon retained as a ‘u’ instead of ‘y’ in English” (55n). This statement is, of course, as preposterous as the mistake it describes. Poe may have affected much more “learning” than he truly “possessed,” but he no doubt learned enough Greek at the University of Virginia to know the difference between a capital “eta” and a Latin “H.”<sup>129</sup> Through these deliberate “mistakes” Poe derided the common practice the editor in “How to Write a Blackwood Article,” in the passage I quote above, termed “filling up.”

In the review of *A Drama of Exile*, then, Poe said that absurd expression could be used to convey the “fantastic,” which he identified with “obscurity of expression,” adding that this was another of his original theories. The foregoing calculated mistakes show exactly what he meant. Despite all this absurdity, most critics continued to presuppose Poe’s adherence to the basic structuring ideas of Romanticism. They thought he placed a positive value on obscurity of expression; that the collapse of semantic mechanisms in his work was meant to lead the reader to contemplate the limitations of logical thought. On this point, as I have earlier stated, Poe’s admirers

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<sup>129</sup> Although he appears to have been a fairly competent Latinist, though not exactly a scholar, Poe’s knowledge of Greek appears to have been rudimentary. Yet, given the emphasis the educators of his time placed on ancient languages, he must have known, at least, the Greek alphabet. On the subject of Poe’s schooling, Kenneth Silverman writes: “Most elementary education in Virginia” in Poe’s youth “depended on private academies, of twenty or so male students each, that offered Greek and Latin, French, English composition, math, some science, and occasionally commercial subjects like accounting and shorthand,” adding that Poe himself studied for “about two years” with “William Burke, an accomplished Latinist” (*Edgar Allan Poe* 23).

When he arrived at the University of Virginia, in 1826, Poe “enrolled in the schools of ancient languages, taught by Cambridge Master of Arts George Long, and of modern languages, taught by th German George Blaeternann” (Silverman, *Edgar Allan Poe* 29). Again, although Latin constituted the main focus of Long’s lessons, it is hard to believe Poe did not then learn to distinguish Greek characters.

In “Poe and H. N. Coleridge’s *Greek Classic Poets*,” Palmer C. Holt points out that although Poe got most of his Greek from reliable secondary sources, he evinced “credible habits of scholarship, for Poe realized he must be eternally vigilant in those classic areas in which he longed to excel but in which his formal training had been too narrowly circumscribed” (8).

have mostly agreed with his detractors that he was much more absurd than even the most “transcendentalist” among his contemporaries, but found different ways to account for this peculiarity. While the latter have generally thought that Poe was very obtuse—almost incredibly so —, the former have tended to regard him as either a brilliant lunatic, a prophet, or both.

In fact, Floyd Stovall himself seems to have had serious misgivings concerning Poe’s worth. As we have seen, he thought that as a critic Poe did not meant what he actually said, and said more than he meant. The best he could muster in his defence was: “His love of sweeping generalization and of striking metaphor sometimes betrayed him (...) into saying more than he intended” (Stovall, “Poe’s Debt” 794). As I said, Stovall is speaking specifically of Poe’s criticism, and this makes his accusation even more damaging. Could he be speaking of the same Edgar Allan Poe who in the “Exordium” published in *Graham’s Magazine* in January 1842 had condemned the American “transcendentalist” critics of his time for displaying precisely what he termed a “frantic spirit of *generalization*” that made a criticism “anything and everything at once?:”

of this science we know nothing, and really wish to know less; but we object to our contemporary’s appropriation in its behalf, of a term to which we, in common with a large majority of mankind, have been accustomed to attach a very definite idea. Is there no word but “criticism” which may be made to serve the purposes of “Arcturus?” Has it any objection to Orphicism, or Dialism, or Emersonism, or any other pregnant compound indicative of confusion worse confounded?

(43)

In the same text, Poe affirmed, in fact, the specificity of criticism against the “transcendentalists:”

Criticism is *not*, we think, an essay, nor a sermon, nor an oration, nor a chapter in history, nor a philosophical speculation, nor a prose-poem, nor an art novel, nor a dialogue. In fact, it *can be* nothing in the world but—a criticism. But if it were all

that Arcturus imagines, it is not very clear why it might not be equally “imaginative” or “dramatic”—a romance or a melo-drama, or both. That it would be a farce cannot be doubted. (“Exordium” 43)

But we should not pay Poe any mind. Instead, Stovall, one of the leading authorities on the subject in his time, instructed readers to forgive him, for he did not mean what he said.

Among the earliest attempts to rehabilitate Poe after the rough handling he suffered at the hands of Winters, Richard Wilbur’s was certainly the most influential. But Wilbur started by granting Winters’s contention. He did not contest that Poe’s poems were, strictly speaking, meaningless; instead, he attempted to vindicate unmeaningness through Poe’s poems. Poe’s “vagueness [is] a consequence of his unearthly subject-matter; his denial of Intellect a means to ultimate truth” (Wilbur, *Complete Poems* 12). “The City in the Sea,” for example, is, according to Wilbur, “so thoroughly pictorial, so lacking in narrative or argumentative structure, that all evidence of Poe’s true meaning must be drawn from external sources, largely from prose-pieces of later composition. The same is true of ‘The valley of Unrest,’ which, taken by itself, yields no ideas and only the ghost of a story” (Wilbur, *Complete Poems* 32). In other words, Poe’s poems lack any of the two varieties of intelligible content, argument or narrative. Their meaning should be sought in Poe’s prose. On this point too, Wilbur is in full agreement with Yvor Winters, who answered to those that argued that Poe was an “intellectual poet” by remarking that “this intellectuality, if that is the name for it, is all anterior to the poem, not in the poem; it resides merely in the rules for the practice of obscurantism which I have defined” (“Edgar Allan Poe” 261).

Wilbur, then, developed these notions into a general theory of poetry:

Poetry does not offer ‘meaning,’ it offers ‘effect.’ What is more, the poem’s ‘effect,’ its power to induce a certain ‘spiritual’ state of mind in the reader, depends precisely on the obscuration of ‘meaning.’ Poe thinks of the poem, here and generally, not as an object of intellectual and emotional knowledge, but as a sort of magic spell or

mesmeric pass; it should move us not to contemplation but to a state of strange abstraction in which we seem, for a moment, to apprehend an unearthly beauty.

(*Complete Poems* 34)

Poe's poems would therefore be symbols in the religious sense of the word, that is, tokens of untranslatable ideal realities in which the poet has faith. But Poe's mysticism was so extreme, Wilbur thought, that his poems, unlike other symbols, did not really *mean* a thing in the world. Or, in any case, whatever actual meaning they might have, that is not what Poe meant. Thus, Wilbur reinforces the old assertion that Poe did not "mean" what he actually "meant," adding that he scorned to convey any intelligible meaning at all:

It is as if the 'content' of the poems were there mainly because something *must* be there; content seems less important, finally, than what is done to it, and what Poe does to it is to render it 'indefinite.' That is, he obscures his subject-matter enough to prevent the reader from having a conclusive sense of the poem's meaning; such a conclusive understanding would contain the reader's mind within the poem, whereas what is desired is a sense of transcending tiny mundane thought-patterns in the direction of a 'vague and therefore spiritual' realm where the closure of the mind on its material is impossible. Poe's whole magic consists in starting the imagination and then not stopping it. (Wilbur, *Complete Poems* 34-35)

I have been quoting from Wilbur's introductory essay to his 1959 edition of Poe's *Poems* I have quoted earlier in this dissertation. In a lecture delivered in the same year, "The House of Poe," he maintained that Poe, like the more well respected American authors of prose fiction, Hawthorne and Melville, was "intentionally symbolic." I think we can make no sense about him until we consider his work—and in particular his prose fiction—as deliberate and often brilliant allegory" (808). Thus, he thought the tales embodied the same extreme Romantic conception of poetry that he found in the poems:

Poe conceived of art, you see, not as a means of giving imaginative order to earthly experience, but as a stimulus to unearthly visions. The work of literary art does not, in Poe's view, present the reader with a provisional arrangement of reality; instead, it seeks to disengage the reader's mind from reality and propel it toward the ideal. Now, since Poe thought the function of art was to set the mind soaring upward in what he called 'a wild effort to reach the Beauty above,' it was important to him that the poem or tale should not have such definiteness and completeness of meaning as might contain the reader's mind within the work. Therefore, Poe's criticism places a positive value on the obscuration of meaning, on a dark suggestiveness, on a deliberate vagueness by means of which the reader's mind may be set adrift towards the beyond. (Wilbur, "House of Poe" 808-809)

Wilbur supposes that the true meaning of Poe's poetry and fiction must be sought in his criticism. But the above paragraph, and particularly the idea that poetry should avoid "containing the reader's mind," is distinctly reminiscent of Emerson's manner; that is, of that very "Orphicism, or Dialism, or Emersonism" Poe ridiculed in his "Exordium."

In reality, Wilbur's practice belies this declaration, inasmuch as his theory of Poe's poetry does not flow, as he claims, from the criticism. In reality, Wilbur projected, or rather forced, his allegorical reading of the tales of women on Poe's criticism. For him, "Ligeia," "Morella," "Berenice," and "Eleonora" are "allegorical embodiments" of the "myth of the poet's life" which "permeates" Poe's poetry (*Complete Poems* 13). Indeed, Wilbur explains the symbolism of those poems which appear to him to have no subject-matter, explicitly or implicitly, in terms of that allegory.

The mourning narrator, then, would represent the poet. He is, as it were, the less allegorical of the persons of the drama. His female counterpart, on the other hand, is regarded as fully and emphatically allegorical. According to Wilbur, it would truly be a mistake to think of her as a literal



woman. He thought that the poet's yearning for her represented "the poet's nostalgia for 'Psyche,' for his lost intuitive possession of all things. That is what all of Poe's dead and lamented ladies stand for: Ligeia, Lenore, Morella, the whole troop" (*Complete Poems* 16). Thus, Wilbur saw in Poe precisely the same male mythical narrative of the origin of poetry that Gilbert and Gubar have found in Shelley, in whose work, they write, woman appeared as "an epi-psyche, a soul out of the poet's soul" (*Madwoman* 12).

The women in the tales, still according to Wilbur, were "subjectively transformed or 'Pythagorized' by the hero" (*Complete Poems* 16). Of course, this process requires their death, and this explains why the narrators of these tales did *not* regret that these women were dying, but rather welcomed their demise. But Wilbur does not think this is very relevant. After all, he thought, these were not *real* women.<sup>130</sup>

He accepts, therefore, that the female characters had to be "Pythagorised"—a term he derived from "Morella"—out of existence in order that the poet might transcend "physical" reality. It is precisely this process that Wilbur regards as an allegory of poetry:

The point is that imagination for Poe must be unconditioned; must utterly repudiate the things of this diseased Earth; must approach the ideal, not merely *through* the real, but by the negation of the real. Ermengarde and Rowena are mundane, physical creatures, daughters of the 'outer and everyday world;' we will do them no violence if we see them as allegorical figures representing Earthly Beauty. Unhappily for them, the poet has once enjoyed, in and through Psyche (Eleanora, Ligeia), an

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130 Wilbur's theory can itself ultimately be traced to Baudelaire's first essay on Poe, in which the French poet, as we have seen, writes that female characters like Ligeia and Morella "participent fortement de la nature de leur créateur" ("Edgar Poe" 618).

Incidentally, that article also inaugurated the practice of applying quotations or paraphrases from "Ligeia" and "Morella" directly to Poe. For example: "Si jamais l'esprit de roman, pour me servir d'une expression de notre poète, à présidé à une naissance—esprit sinistre et orageux!—certes il présida à la sienne" (Baudelaire, "Edgar Poe" 599). This, of course, is adapted from one of the opening paragraphs of "Ligeia." The following sentence, which appears later in the same article, contains a direct quotation from "Morella" used in a similar way: "J'apprends qu'il [Poe] ne buvait pas en gourmand, mais en barbare, avec une activité et une économie de temps tout à fait américaines, comme accomplissant une fonction homicide, comme ayant en lui *quelque chose* à tuer, *a worm that would not die*" (613-14).

acquaintance with Supernal Beauty, and therefore ‘nothing earthly’ can satisfy his esthetic hunger. The poet may *use* Earthly Beauty as a means of reconceiving or remembering Psyche; the process, however, is not so much sublimation as it is an attritive negation. The images of Rowena and Berenice are *worn away* in the hero’s mind by the action of his imagination, until they have grown so manageably indistinct that they may be supplanted by the images of Ligeia and Egæus’ mother.

(*Complete Poems* 16-17)

Therefore:

The ‘Eleonora’ or ‘Ligeia’ sort of story is an account by a ‘mad’ hero of how, through dwelling among fallen creatures [meaning Rowena and Ermengarde] on a fallen planet [meaning the material world], he has managed—at least momentarily—to blot out all consciousness of his environment and retrieve a state of mind unconditionally visionary [identified with the realization of a spiritual communion with the previously “pythagorised” Ligeia or Eleonora]. (19)

The destruction of these “earthly” women represented “the symbolic destruction of the physical,” or the “symbolical destruction of material fact” (Wilbur, *Complete Poems* 37, 39). In other words, their sacrifice is a sort of ritual enactment of the apocalypse. Thus, Wilbur tacitly admits that the human condition is identified in the tale with the *male* condition. In effect, when he states that “we would do them no violence” by seeing the “spiritual” counterparts of these earthly women as allegorical figures, he instructs the reader to disregard the hints of actual violence in the tale. He thereby implies that Poe endorsed the Romantic myth, and had no intention of exposing its sexist implications, of which, indeed, he appears to have thought the author was unaware. In other words, he thought that Poe did not think “Pythagorising” a woman was a form of aggression. Yet, the narrator ends up “Pythagorising” both the “celestial” and the “earthly” women. In fact, the narrator is consistently aggressive towards women—live women, that is. The hidden, or not so

hidden, murders, which Wilbur missed because he thought Poe could not but be a sincere Romantic, of course, suggest this was deliberate on Poe's part. However, in order to explain the tale, Wilbur sometimes goes beyond the narrator's delusion, hitting on some of the very irregularities that show us that Poe was not being sincere. He was one of the few to notice, for example, that the ghost in "Berenice" *must* belong to Egæus' mother—Egæus himself never suspected this.

Since the publication of Wilbur's essays, most attempts to make sense of Poe's work have built on his basic interpretation. Even James W. Gargano, despite declaring that Poe's narrators were far more unreliable than had previously been thought, assumed Poe's belief in the validity of his narrator's glimpse of the Ideal in his article "Poe's 'Ligeia:' Dream and Destruction:"

Like many another romantic idealist, he lives tensely at the highest pitch of his passionate imagination (...). Momentarily, then, he attains that glory or intensification of being which justifies existence for the romantic. In other words, he has escaped the limitations of the mortal condition through a vision of the ethereal and eternal sphere of the Ideal. Ligeia, then, is (...) a huge metaphor for the narrator's romantic version of a Platonic "heaven." (339)

Surprisingly, although he stated that the narrator was unreliable, what Gargano offers here is a faithful rendering of the moral that narrator himself suggests for his story. At the same time, of course, he ignores the fact that Poe had in fact denied in *Marginalia* ever having achieved, even momentarily, the "glory" mentioned by Gargano.

The outlook on Poe's work offered by G. R. Thompson *Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales* (1973) is also a restatement of Wilbur's "apocalyptic" thesis. In tales like "Ligeia" he found "an overall structure of collapse mirroring the pattern of the universe itself" that could not be reduced to plain sense: "the reader is left to choose between the supernatural and the psychological, or for strongest effect, to think one theory and feel the other" (*Poe's Fiction* 90, 103). Some years later, in 1979, David Ketterer's *The Rationale of Deception in Poe* disappointed the expectations of

a new approach created by his title by presenting yet another rendition of Wilbur's theory. Indeed, Ketterer's "deception" exactly corresponds to Wilbur's idea of the collapse of meaning: "Poe conceived of the act of artistic creation in terms of the destruction of everyday reality;" "what occurs [in "Al Aaraaf"] is an apocalypse of the mind" (Ketterer, *Rationale* 165, 166). As for the tales, Ketterer maintained, like Thompson, that their meaning was radically unsettled: "almost all of them can be genuinely interpreted in any number of ways;" "complete interpretation involves the ability to maintain these varying approaches and possibilities in a state of omnidimensional fusion" (181). Ketterer regards this fusion as the true signifier, inasmuch as it makes "the distinction between the literal narrative surface and the symbolic meaning disappear" (181).

Joan Dayan's feminist approach in *Fables of the Mind: An Inquiry into Poe's Fiction* (1987) offered a genuinely refreshing perspective on Poe's work. Yet, her intuition that Poe's tales dramatised gender politics was hampered, in my opinion, by her adherence to the basic tenets that support the traditional view of Poe. She reiterated that his "two-tiered notion of composition" resulted in an "indefiniteness" that was "a radical uncertainty that makes us physically uneasy" (Dayan, *Fables* 7). Recognising that the aesthetic she attributed to Poe was emphatically irrationalistic, she thought that Poe had advocated, against Locke's epistemology, a "discipline of not knowing;" "Poe must block comprehension and force us to recognize the point where reason fails" (13).<sup>131</sup> Dayan also explicitly denies the viability of natural explanations for Poe's "supernatural," claiming that it is "in the domain of the inconceivable, of the impossible, that Poe will produce his fiction" (17). This constitutes a tacit reiteration of Baudelaire's old notion of the double Poe. We can scarcely believe this is the same man that wrote "How to Write a Blackwood

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131 In this sentence Dayan refers specifically to *Eureka*. However, she believes that in the "prose poem," which she rightly points out is "unreadable," and "The Poetic Principle," "although Poe implies we can know, he lures us into the kind of 'knowing' that he writes his fiction to expose and subvert" (*Fables of the Mind* 12). I believe both prose pieces mentioned by Dayan realise, indeed, the same kind of delirium to which the narrator of "Ligeia" is subject. Both are also, in my opinion, evidently satirical. *Eureka*, in particular, is not only marked by the same kind of irony that we have seen in the *Marginalia* piece about the "power of words," but also evidently fictional. However, this is not the place to pursue this argument.

In any case, I believe Poe's purposes were roughly the opposite of what Dayan supposed them to be.

Article,” where the editor advised the credulous Zenobia to be “sure and abuse a man named Locke” (Poe, 342).

The scholarly debate about Poe has revolved over the same central axioms for so long that they have come to be regarded as sacred dogmas. In the last decades, it is true, critics have become increasingly aware of the contradiction between Poe’s “severe aesthetic formalism” and his supposed “transcendentalism,” but have for the most part attempted to describe this as an *apparent* contradiction (McGann, *The Poet* 94). If anything, most recent criticism takes the idea that Poe was a mystical visionary to even more perplexing extremes. Jerome J. McGann’s 2014 book *The Poet Edgar Allan Poe: Alien Angel* exemplifies this trend. In it, the author contends that Poe’s supposedly extreme Romanticism was actually closer to the symbolism of Rimbaud and Mallarmé than it was to High Romanticism. The pervasive theme of Poe’s poetry, according to McGann, is what he calls the “catastrophe of the beauty. It is the moment when a reader understands what Poe is saying: that a thing of beauty—this thing of beauty—is not and never could be ‘a joy forever’” (McGann, *The Poet* 94).

McGann is convinced that Poe conceived of the poet as a “mourner” for the lost beauty supposedly represented by his women. Although he never explicitly mentions the tales, like Wilbur, he thinks of “Berenice,” “Morella,” and “Ligeia” as metaphors of Romanticism; of the quest of the poet for that irretrievably lost supernal Beauty. Indeed, he attributes to Poe himself the kind of desperate “transcendentalism” displayed by the narrators of these tales. Sarah Helen Whitman, whom he calls “one of Poe’s best readers,” “several times commented on Poe’s lingering pity and sorrow for the dead [and a] fear of having grieved them by some involuntary wrong of desertion or forgetfulness. No critical remark ever made about Poe seems to me more incisive (...) The point of Poe’s great subject— ‘mournful and never-ending remembrance’—is to attempt the impossible: to do the dead justice on their own terms” (McGann, *The Poet* 166).

Thus, “mourning” would be the peculiar form the Romantic longing for a putative original unity assumed in Poe: “when the catastrophe of the beautiful occurs, when the loved become the forever lost, the official recorders of human life, the poets, plunge into a crisis;” scholars “call that crisis Romanticism and have tracked its proposals for living with the consciousness of ultimate loss” (168). In McGann’s theory, therefore, Romanticism ceases to be an historically defined cultural phenomenon, but rather a manifestation of an intemporal human drama, the loss of a loved one—or more specifically, of a beloved *woman*. This loss was supposedly transfigured into “the catastrophe of the beautiful,” which he thought was represented in Poe’s tales by the death of the title-characters. This interpretation clashes, of course, in a very obvious way, with the actual meaning of Poe’s tales. Morella and Berenice are never described as *beautiful*, and, while Ligeia is, we are clearly given to understand, first, that she might not have appeared so to most men, and second, that the narrator himself did not perceive her beauty until she died. As I have already remarked more than once, this effectively conveys the impression that *dead women* alone are beautiful. Indeed, if these narrators love these women at all, it is only after they are dead, therefore, no *live* woman can be described as their *beloved*.

Despite these ominous signs, McGann believes a tale like “Ligeia” must be approached in the same spirit in which the “mad” narrator wrote his story. Like Wilbur, McGann thinks that the supposed impossibility of reducing its mystery to a straightforward, consistent sequence of events enables the narrated experience to work as a springboard to unearthly visions. And the collapse of intelligible content is supposed to “propel,” as Wilbur puts it, the mind of the reader to a meaning beyond meaning, ever-expanding and perpetually unsettled. Thus, McGann validates the view of Poe’s poetry that Wilbur expressed in terms of the metaphor of depth along with the extreme sexist ideology of the narrator:

Poe’s criticism, then, assures that his work does have meaning. And Poe also assures us that this meaning is not in the surface but in the depths. If we accept Poe’s

invitation to play detective, and commence to read him with an eye for submerged meaning, it is not long before we sense that there *are* meanings to be found, and that in fact many of Poe's stories, though superficially dissimilar, tell the same tale.

("The House of Poe" 809)

The "surface," here, represents the literal, intelligible "meaning"—meaning properly so called—, as opposed to the "depths" which correspond to that profound mythical representation of the human condition that is, according to Wilbur, the only serious story Poe had to tell. Poe is the indisputable inventor of the detective story as we know it—a fact to which one suspects Wilbur meant to allude. However, the critic is here using the "detective" as a metaphor. His "detective" represents the precise opposite of the attitude of Poe's famous detective, C. Auguste Dupin. Wilbur is in effect telling us *not* to play the detective unto "Ligeia," that is, not to pay the kind of attention to detail for which Dupin is renowned (an advice later reiterated by Thompson). Wilbur assures us that this would be vain, and more importantly, not at all what Poe wanted the readers of "Ligeia" to do. Wilbur thought Poe wanted us to engage in deep metaphysical speculation and contemplate the futility of reason, while tapping on our own emotional experience of loss and bereavement. He wanted us, that is, to follow his narrator's example. Again, this approach is precisely the opposite of Dupin's method: "there is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial. The depth lies in the valleys where we seek her, and not upon the mountain-tops where she is found" (Poe, "Murders in the Rue Morgue" 545).

Moreover, "in his criticism" Poe never said that the meaning of his work, was in the "depths." He said, more than once, exactly the opposite, using the metaphor of the well in the same sense Dupin gave to it. Thus, Wilbur betrays the undeclared source of his theory of Poe's poetry: "Ligeia." For, contrary to his claim, this is the only place in Poe's work where truth is said to lie in the "depths," more specifically, at the "bottom" of Ligeia's eyes: "What was it—that something

more profound than the well of Democritus—which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What was it?” (Poe, “Ligeia” 313).

This is a perfect example of the way in which the reader’s expectations may distort a text—or, in this case, several. In the “Letter to B——,” with which he prefaced the *Poems* (1831), Poe flatly stated: “As regards the greater truths, men oftener err by seeking them at the bottom than at the top; the depth lies in the huge abysses where wisdom is sought—not in the palpable palaces where she is found. The ancients were not always right in hiding the goddess in a well” (7-8). This is an allusion to the famous saying attributed to Democritus in Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*: “Of a truth we know nothing, for truth is in a well” (9.72). The quotation is there presented as evidence of that philosopher’s skepticism, a school of thought which derived its name, still according to Laertius, from the fact of their followers being “always looking for a solution and never finding one” (9.90). The narrator of “Ligeia,” then, places himself neatly in what Poe said *in his criticism* was the wrong side of the “well;” in the company of Coleridge, who, according to the same “Letter to B——,” ended up “buried in metaphysics” (10).

Indeed, the word “buried” reinforces the association between the Romantic idealism of Coleridge and over-profundity. The idea is that, by seeking profound answers to all problems, the reasoner will inevitably fail to perceive the solutions to most problems, which, in reality, are superficial. However, Poe also implies that the expectation of “depth” confirms itself: that is, the “metaphysical” thinker will invariably find what he is looking for, but not the an intelligible solution, which, in reality, that kind of reasoner *did* not hope to find. The same idea, as we have seen, was already implied in Diogenes Laertius account of skepticism.

Wilbur probably noticed the contradiction. But, like Stovall, he believed that Poe was a “transcendentalist” at heart, and did not mean what he said about Coleridge. Accordingly, he tells us that Poe, the critic, did not really mean what *he* said about the “well of Democritus” either; he meant what *his narrator* said. Again, I suspect that if we were talking of any other writer but Poe,



this notion would have been rejected as preposterous, but, somehow, Poe has so thoroughly puzzled his readers that the idea stuck.

In reality, however, the narrator illustrates the meaning of the phrase “buried in metaphysics” Poe had applied to Coleridge. He had missed the superficial solution to his problem by looking for it in the “depths.” Thus, while he did thoroughly succeed in “disengaging,” as Wilbur puts it in a passage I quoted above, his “mind from reality,” the tale contradicts the idea that he had thereby achieved a valid insight into a higher truth. On the contrary, he had only succeeded in making himself blind to the particular truth of the matter. In this sense, then, there is no contradiction between the tale and the criticism; on the contrary, the fiction slyly enforces Poe’s point.

It should be noted, however, that the reference to Democritus is a precisely coded allusion to an intermediate source: the passage in Glanvill that Poe would later use as a motto for his 1841 tale “A Descent into the Maelstrom:” “The ways of God in Nature, as in Providence, are not as *our* ways; nor are the models that we frame any way commensurate to the vastness, profundity, and unsearchableness of His works, *which have a depth in them greater than the well of Democritus*” (577 emphasis in the original). This is a slightly distorted quotation from “Against Confidence in Philosophy and Matters of Speculation,” included in the volume *Essays on Several Important Subjects* (1676).<sup>132</sup> This passage, then, evidently provided the stimulus for Poe’s sentence. This is clearly indicated by his hinting of something *more* profound than the Well, an idea not found in Laertius text. This allusion provides a concrete link between Poe’s text and Glanvill, which was

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132 Glanvill’s text was, indeed, slightly different: “The ways of God in Nature (as in Providence) are not as ours are: Nor are the Models that we frame any way commensurate to the vastness and profundity of his Works; which have a depth in them greater than the Well of Democritus” (Glanvill, “Against Confidence” 15).

In Poe’s motto, “ours” is replaced with “our ways,” and the word “unsearchableness” is added after “profundity.” This sentence appears, with these two alterations, in the preface of J. C. Colquhoun’s *Isis Revelata An Inquiry into the Origin, Progress, and Present State of Animal Magnetism* (1836), from which I suspect Poe copied it (see xxviii). It is also worth noticing that the motto of “Maelstrom” is attributed to Joseph Glanville. The only other place where the author’s name is spelled with an “e” is the pamphlet *Plain Evidence of the Existence of Witches* (1834) mentioned by Barbara Cantalupo in “Poe’s Visual Tricks.”

probably designed, among other things, to prompt the reader to discover the other significant connections “Ligeia” establishes with *Essays*.

Glanvill’s sentence carries the suggestion that the ways of God were somehow *deeper* than Truth itself. At times Glanvill’s style is a little too loose, and this is a perfect example. With this sentence, he creates the no doubt unintended suggestion of over-profundity—which was probably what interested Poe. The ways of God, which Glanvill presumably regarded as the ultimate unattainable Truth, were somehow *deeper* than Democritus’s truth, which, according to the pithy sentence Laertius attributes to the Greek philosopher, was itself fundamentally *unknowable*. In Poe’s text, however, since the story is one of delusion, the secondary meaning is made relevant. In fact, as we have seen, in practice Glanvill was not at all “skeptical;” on the contrary, he was as gullible as Poe’s narrator, a resemblance one suspects Poe meant indirectly to point out.

Meanwhile, Poe consistently kept denying his narrator’s assertion that truth was in the depths after the publication of “Ligeia.” One notable example is a small article included in a series entitled *Literary Small Talk*, published in January and February 1839 on the *American Museum*. Apparently, the article is no more than a resented, somewhat arbitrary attack on Bulwer-Lytton for infringing rules Poe himself constantly transgressed. Here the ubiquitous image of the well resurfaces:

Bulwer, in my opinion, wants the true vigour of intellect which would prompt him to seek, and enable him to seize truth upon the surface of things. He imagines her forever in the well. (...) He (...) condescends to ape the externals of a deep meaning, and will submit to be low rather than fail in appearing profound. It is this coxcombry which leads him so often into allegory and objectless personification. Does he mention ‘truth’ in the most ordinary phrase? —she is, with a great T, Truth, the divinity. (Poe, *Brevities* 458)

Thus, Bulwer-Lytton's penchant for allegory and generalisation is mere affectation, as was, Poe maintains, the pedantic display of abstruse learning in *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834): "in its abundant allusions to Egyptian theology, gives also sufficient evidence of his love of the 'far-fetched'" (*Brevities* 458). Bulwer-Lytton's over-profundity, therefore, consists in hinting of "deep" unseizable meanings, and throwing abstruse, but really meaningless allusions in the way of the reader for the sole purpose of bullying him or her into admiration. But then, this is exactly what Poe did in many of his tales, notably "Ligeia," in which Egyptian and other "deep" Oriental lore figures prominently, along with the pledge of a commitment to profundity, and a corresponding scorn for plain meaning.

All this would suggest, of course, that Poe did not agree with his narrator's views. But this conclusion is not imposed from outside the text, as Wilbur supposed the allegorical interpretation was. On the contrary, it is strictly coded in the text. Indeed, the narrator gets a little too technical about the eyes. So technical, indeed, as to let the literal import of his words interfere with the metaphor of the well. His inspection of the eyes of Ligeia is certainly no metaphor. He really *did* "struggle to fathom" them; to discover that "which lay far within the pupils of my beloved" ("Ligeia" 313 emphasis mine).

Depth is the ostensible tertium of the comparison of eyes and wells. However, the narrator involuntarily draws attention to another characteristic these objects share. Under normal circumstances, one cannot really see *through* the pupil with the naked eye, any more than one can see the bottom of a well, unless it be dry. To examine the retina modern healthcare professionals employ a special instrument, the ophthalmoscope, or funduscope, which had not yet been invented when "Ligeia" was written. The reason for this is that the interior of the eye being always necessarily darker than the exterior, its smooth, transparent surface functions as a mirror, as does the surface of the water in a well.

It is believed that the transparent portion of the iris is called “pupil,” from the Latin “pupilla,” meaning “little girl-doll,” in reference to that minute reflection (see *OED*). The narrator’s own insistence on “depth” and on looking *into* the eye, evokes this idea, which suggests the futility of his misguided attempts to “fathom” the mystery. In this case, at least, the solution was superficial, for no matter how much he “struggled,” he cannot possibly have seen *beyond* the surface, and there he saw—he must have seen—his own reflection, but, of course, could no more recognise it than he could his own shadow. In both cases, he plunges into metaphysics, and gets lost in slippery theories of personal identity, dragging the reader with him. The literal sense of the narrator’s words—or rather the literal impossibility of the task he proposes himself to perform—blocks the path to that supreme Truth he had promised us. As a consequence, his metaphor of the quest for a knowledge too “deep” for words is turned on itself, and becomes instead a metaphor of over-profundity. Poe’s text never delivers on the promise of depth—on the contrary, the surface keeps providing the answers the narrator did not even believe existed. Somehow, reality and logic always get in the way of Poe’s paths to the ideal world of absolute Truth and Beauty in the most spectacular fashion.

G. R. Thompson, incidentally, has noted a similar structure in “The Fall of the House of Usher:” “The narrator’s first impression of the house is that it is like a human face (...). Then he looks down on the pool, but sees only the reflection of the ‘face’ of the house. What is equally likely, of course, is that he should see imaged there his own reflected features, since Poe is careful to point out that the narrator wheels his horse up to ‘the precipitous brink’ of the tarn and thus gazes straight down” (Thompson, *Poe’s Fiction* 95). Thompson goes on to note that, later in the tale the narrator finds himself equally fascinated by Usher’s “large and luminous eyes.”<sup>133</sup> (...) He becomes like Usher. In meeting Usher, he is symbolically staring into the face of his psychological double. (...) Thus Usher’s ‘arabesque’ face and the face of the house are the same, and when the narrator

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<sup>133</sup> Incidentally, this phrase is actually never applied to Usher, but only to Ligeia: “her large and luminous eyes” (Poe, “Ligeia” 314).

gazes into the pool, the reflected ‘arabesque’ face is merged with his own—symbolically is his own” (96).

Of course, Thompson himself has only just provided us with the crucial information that shows us that the face the narrator saw on the surface of the tarn was not only “symbolically,” but literally his own. Poe was as careful here as he had been in “Ligeia.” Just as in the latter tale he repeatedly pointed out that the narrator was precisely between a source of light and the shadow he saw on the floor, in “Usher” he first describes the “tarn” so as to make it absolutely clear that it was a mirror, that is, a dark background with a smooth glassy surface, repeatedly mentioning reflected images, and then twice points out that his narrator’s gaze was perpendicular to that surface when he saw what he identifies as the “face” of the house: “I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down;” “my somewhat childish experiment—that of looking down within the tarn” (Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” 398, 399). This fact—for nothing could be more certain than this identification—effectively confirms Susan Amper’s brilliant discovery that the tale is narrated by Usher himself.<sup>134</sup>

Thus, the well-coded parallelism between the eye and the tarn performs the same function that the comparison of Ligeia’s eye with a well performs in her tale: that of highlighting the mirror-like quality of the pupil. This crucial clue points towards a natural explanation, a possibility, however, which Thompson, like the narrator, refuses to contemplate: “The ghosts in the tale of Usher, then, are those of the mind. Such an analysis does not deny the supernaturalistic surface level

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134 According to her, the face in the “tarn” is in fact both the face of the narrator of the tale and Usher’s.

According to Amper, “Usher” represents Poe’s blending of the explained supernatural with the detective story at its best: “‘Usher’ offers us (...) an excess of sensation into which we are tempted to sink, and at the same time a trail of clues we are invited to track;” “[w]hat we find is much mendacity on the part of the narrator, and strong evidence of murder in both deaths [Roderick’s and Madeline Usher’s]” (“Masters of Deceit” 151, 152).

According to this reading, then, the tale is technically another of Poe’s femicide stories. I will not here recap all of the detailed argument that supports it, but only Amper’s conclusion. According to her, Usher planned to murder his sister, who was spending the family’s fortune on charity. “What he needs is a fall guy, so he has his childhood friend visit him. He will trade places with the friend, kill him, blow up the house, and ride away into the night, a new and free man” (Amper, *Masters of Deceit* 159). Accordingly, Amper writes: “I believe that the narrator is Roderick: not a psychological or literary double, but Roderick Usher in the flesh” (“Masters of Deceit” 160).

of the tale. (...) Nothing at all may have happened in a conventional sense in the outside world—only in the inner world of the narrator’s mind” (Thompson, *Poe’s Fiction* 96-97).

Thus, Thompson validates the narrator’s claim that the image had a deep meaning, and, indeed, his overall disdain for superficial, definite meanings. However, the care with which Poe described the actual circumstances of the observer in both “Usher” and “Ligeia” manifests a concern with the viability of a literal, natural explanation for his narrator’s vision, a concern which is expressed precisely by the emphasis his text places on the surface. He therefore forces the reader to acknowledge that the narrators of both tales saw *their own image* in the surface of the fascinating eyes, and that this was at least in part what disturbed them so about them. Poe is equally careful in pointing out, moreover, that these narrators lose sight of this crucial fact, and believe that they have seen something beyond the surface. The narrator of “Usher,” in the passage just quoted, claims that he looked “down within” the tarn, just as the narrator of “Ligeia” was obsessed with something he thought he had seen “far within the pupils of my beloved” (Poe, “Ligeia” 313 emphasis mine). In the conditions they describe, however, it is physically impossible for them to have seen anything but a reflected image of themselves, and, by pointing out this literal interpretation, Poe indicates that theirs is a false epiphany. Through their mistake, or rather through their blindness, these narrator’s betray their secret to the reader.

For Thompson, however, the image of the bewildered narrator gazing into the eyes of his friend becomes the emblem of the kind of transcendental method of indirection he attributes to Poe: “a total pattern of ironic mockery of absurd self-delusion is all that remains—with reader and narrator left face to face, as it were, staring into each other’s luminous eyes, wondering exactly what *has* happened in these subjective encounters with the dark well of the unconscious” (Thompson, *Poe’s Fiction* 104). Implied is the old symbolism of the eyes expressed by the cliché “windows to the soul.”

But the mistake they make, and which Thompson himself helped to uncover, invalidates such a reading. The supposed subjective insight into the deep truths of human psychology that Thompson saw represented in these tales is a hoax—not a transcendental hoax, patterned after the theories of Schlegel, but a common hoax. In short, Poe systematically vindicates the surface that his narrators constantly ignore and disparage. This is a pattern that is repeated throughout the tale. No matter where we look in the surface of “Ligeia,” we find the semblance of the narrator. But he never paid attention to the surface—he is constantly attempting to see past it.

In fact, the “arabesque” performs a similar function in “Ligeia.” It functions, more or less, as the inkblots in Roschach’s test, which provide an intrinsically meaningless shape on which the observer can project his personality. This is evidently what takes place with the “figures” wrought in black against a golden background of the tapestry in Rowena’s room, which “partook of the true character of the arabesque only when regarded from a single point of view,” but “were made changeable in aspect,” so that: “To one entering the room, they bore the appearance of simple monstrosities; but, upon a farther advance, this appearance gradually departed; and step by step, as the visiter moved his station on the chamber, he saw himself surrounded by the ghastly forms which belong to the superstition of the Norman, or arise in the guilty slumbers of the monk” (Poe, “Ligeia” 322).

Barbara Cantalupo, incidentally, thought that the chief “phantasmagoric” device in Rowena’s room was “anamorphosis,” which she defined as “the manipulation of perspective to create an image that is distorted or hidden except when seen from a specific point of view,” stating that “Poe purposefully inserts” this “definition in” this passage (“Poe’s Visual Tricks” 54). According to her reading, then, the “narrator” here “argues for a ‘single point of view’—not any point of view chosen by the viewer. In other words, Poe’s text refers to an anamorphosis. (...) the viewer of an anamorphic image (the kind being described in Poe’s text) must move through visual distortions and either position himself at a point determined by the author/creator or use an

anamorphic device—‘a contrivance now common’—in order to discern a recognizable image or, in Poe’s words, ‘the true character of the arabesque’” (57). Thus, according to Cantalupo’s reading, the narrator is saying that the tapestry “yields a coherent picture only when the viewer positions him- or herself at a specific vantage point” (56).

It appears to me, however, that the passage does not admit the construal Cantalupo places on it. First, the narrator is not here specifying, contrary to her suggestion, a determinate “single point of view.” On the contrary, he is saying that the “arabesque” nature of the designs was only apparent when they were seen from *any* single point of view. As the viewer moved his station—for he evidently refers to his own experience—what had at first appeared “simple monstrosities,” that is, non-representational designs, assumed, in his eyes at least, recognisable form. In other words, the movement of the figures, either real or apparent, is what causes the transformation. Indeed, Richard Kopley has since argued very persuasively that the “contrivance now common” Cantalupo mentions refers precisely to the “artificial introduction of a strong continual current of wind behind the draperies—giving a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole” by demonstrating that the passage was lifted from the following passage in Bulwer-Lytton’s novel *Pelham: Or, The Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828) (Poe, “Ligeia” 323): “then appears the detail that Poe clearly refashioned: ‘There was, as Glanville afterwards explained to me, a *machine* in this room, *which kept up a faint but perpetual breeze*, and *the light curtains, waving to and fro*, scattered about perfumes of the most exquisite odour’” (Kopley, “Pelham” 111, emphasis in the original). The mechanism the narrator put in place, by ensuring that these designs were kept in constant motion—hence the “uneasy animation”—guaranteed, in fact, that they were never regarded from a “single point of view” (Poe, “Ligeia” 322).<sup>135</sup>

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135 Indeed Kopley tacitly identifies the artificial wind with the “contrivance now common:” “The ‘arabesque figures’ shift, as the narrator walks through the room, from ‘simple monstrosities’ to ‘ghastly forms which belong to the superstition of the Norman (...). These figures are brought to life in a familiar way,” Kopley concludes, alluding to Glanville’s wind-machine in *Pelham* (“Pelham” 111-12).



More importantly, I think Cantalupo failed to perceive that “simple monstrosities” and “character of the arabesque” are equivalent terms, and that these are in explicit opposition with “the ghastly forms” the narrator mentions next. Indeed, the word “arabesque” evidently alludes to the geometrical or vegetal patterns of flowing lines typical of Muslim decorative art, from which “representations of living creatures were excluded” for religious reasons (*OED* def. B.2). By “simple monstrosities,” then, the narrator means abstract designs. Indeed, he is clearly describing a passage from shapelessness to form. The nature of the forms the arabesques assumed is equally clear. The narrator means to allude in a learned fashion to the denizens of hell, as they were usually portrayed in medieval art.<sup>136</sup> The narrator’s use of the impersonal construction “to one entering the room” suggests that *anyone* would see the shapeless arabesques transform into demons—this idea is reiterated by Cantalupo. But it is by no means clear that anyone would *see* these demons in his position. In fact, the idea of the presence of an anamorphic contrivance is, I think, clearly contradicted by the narrator’s statement that these figures were *not* perceivable from any *one* point of view, but were rather prompted by the artificial “animation” he had given to designs that were, in themselves, clearly *non-representational*. Significantly, Cantalupo does not clarify what specific image this supposed “anamorphic” device revealed. The hellish figures the narrator mentions are, I think, the only candidate, but their appearance is not corroborated by the only other witness, which he systematically ignores: Rowena. As we have seen, the narrator was definitely seeing things that were not there. Rowena, as we have seen, mentions only movements in the curtains and slight noises for which she could not account—she mentions, that is, phantasmagoric effects, not those “ghastly forms” he refers. Another detail that seems to militate against Cantalupo’s hypothesis is the final apparition of Ligeia. There, as we have seen, the flowing hair of the image is a clear analogue

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136 That is what he means, but this allusion may be another deliberate “mistake.” According to Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, a work Poe no doubt knew, and to which the name of the second wife, Rowena, is a clear allusion, the “Normans, being a mixed race, and better informed according to the information of the times, had lost most of the superstitious prejudices which their ancestors had brought from Scandinavia, and piqued themselves upon thinking freely upon such topics” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 154). In other words, Scott thought that the Normans were free from “Gothic” superstition.

of, precisely, the non-representational “whirls” on the tapestry, which suggests that the designs ultimately reassumed the “true character of the arabesque,” to facilitate the imaginary return of Ligeia.<sup>137</sup> The specific form the arabesques assume for the narrator, then, appear to me a subjective projection of his guilt.

In her article “Poe’s Arabesque,” a must-read for all those interested in understanding Poe’s use of the term, Patricia C. Smith remarks that, in a semantic drift from its proper meaning, the “arabesque” had become identified in Poe’s time, with the “grotesque.” Thus, in this broadened, imprecise sense, the former term was often applied to the chimerical figures of “Gothic” demons. However, she notices, “the terms grotesque and arabesque really were not as slippery as they seem in 1974,” the date of writing (Smith, “Poe’s Arabesques” 42). For example, *The Encyclopaedia Americana*, quoted by Smith in her text, provided a “succinct and correct definition” of both terms, which Poe could also have found in many other common reference works (42). She also quotes from an anonymous review of Benjamin Disraeli’s *Vivian Grey* (1827), published in the *Monthly Review* in 1827, and probably written by the author himself, which states that the grotesque, that is, the representations of demons and other hellish motifs, are only properly employed to make “us ‘sensible of the terrors of the guilty mind’” (qtd. in Smith 43).

The purpose of the narrator’s vision seems to have been precisely that of manifesting his guilt to the reader. This is, incidentally, consistent with the literary conventions of Poe’s day, and of the horror story in particular. The narrator of Dickens’s “A Madman’s Manuscript,” for example, who resembles Poe’s narrator in so many ways, mentions “strange beings that flocked around me on every side,” and even being “borne upon the arms of demons who swept along upon the wind (...) and spun me round and round” (145). Once again, however, Poe gives proof of his extraordinary ability to instil new vitality to hackneyed ideas. The common confusion between the “arabesque” and the “grotesque” becomes, in his tale, another way of expressing his character’s inability to

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<sup>137</sup> I borrow here Cantalupo’s expression: “The first response to a completely anamorphic image,” which she supposes to be the case of the arabesques in Rowena’s room, “is to question its ‘true nature.’ Can the whirls be made representational?” (“Poe’s Visual Tricks” 58).

understand that his visions were peculiar to himself, and the expression of unavowed guilt for an undetected crime. Thus, yet another avenue to the promised transcendent meaning is blocked by the overwhelming evidence pointing to a definite, literal truth.

It appears to me that peer pressure has played an important part in obscuring Poe's aims. Indeed, it is not very surprising that very few critics dared brave the opinion of the overwhelming majority that Poe's secret was beyond his meaning; that he was too profound for comprehension. Susan Amper was one of the few dissonant voices. Sadly, her groundbreaking doctoral dissertation was never published. But her published output is equally decisive. Her *How to Write About Edgar Allan Poe*, for example, is much more than its unassuming title suggests: it is a call to actually read Poe, as if we encountered him for the first time, and to question what has hitherto always been taken for granted. As regards the tales I have been reading, the "mysteries," Amper ostensibly rejects all ready-made answers:

you could examine the presence of humor in Poe's seemingly dark tales. What, if anything, is funny in the tale? How do you reconcile the humor with the apparent seriousness? Does the humor reduce the tale to travesty? Or do you find yourself pulled in opposite directions? What might the story be showing about the strange, close relationship between horror and humor? In "Ligeia," for example, two women die slow deaths in a hideous drama of revivification: What is funny about that? Is the horror funny? Or is our readiness to laugh at such stories horrible?

(*How to Write* 59)

I have attempted to provide new answers to precisely these questions. Amper here stresses the fundamental ambiguity of the tales, which had been ironed out by previous scholars and lost in translation, in order so to reconcile it with Poe's purposes, and I have tried to do the same.

Wilbur, and all the critics that elaborated on his initial assertions, maintained that the tale tricked the reader into thinking it had intelligible content, when there was in fact nothing to

*understand*. This structure, they thought, reflected Poe's Romantic conviction that nothing could really be known; that truth was a bottomless abyss. The moral of the tale would be, these critics further tell us, that it is foolish to try to make sense of this story, of poetry, or, indeed, of anything. In the end, however, it is not meaning that collapses, but the narrator's ostensibly irrationalist approach, which is turned to scorn and ridicule.

The reader is in fact tricked into thinking there is nothing to understand; this is, after all, what the narrator had been telling us all along. He did not understand his story himself, of course, because he completely refused to approach it rationally. Thus, the narrator demonstrates performatively that, whatever disadvantages might accrue from an excessive reliance on logical, rational thought, there is greater and more immediate danger and ridicule in store for those who refuse to think. He demonstrates, indeed, not only that a "transcendentalist" would supply the absence of meaning in a "quaint" text with fantastical absurdities, but also overlook meaning, when this was available, to accommodate a faith in a higher truth. Incidentally, this is, I suspect, what Poe meant when he said, in the review of *A Drama of Exile*, that the "fantastic in itself (...) —phantasm—may be materially furthered in its development by the *quaint* in phraseology" (4). In "Ligeia," "quaintness" is used, precisely, to intimate the presence of a "phantasm," which is ultimately proved to be just that: all show and no substance.

In the end, it is for the reader to decide what to make of Poe. I personally find it impossible to believe he was serious. I believe, rather, that he intended to challenge gender as well as aesthetical conventions. In this respect, I think his poems are not significantly different from his fiction—or more precisely, they too are fiction, in the full sense of the word. In his study of Poe's poetry, Jerome J. McGann contended that both reflected Poe's desire "to do the dead justice on their own terms," which he thought was "splendidly executed in 'The Sleeper,'" which Poe declared his best poem in the same letter in which he called "Ligeia" his best tale (166).<sup>138</sup> The truth is, however,

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138 "In a letter to James Russell Lowell, Poe wrote: 'I think my best poems, 'The Sleeper,' 'The Conqueror Worm,' 'The Haunted Palace,' 'A Paen <sic.>,' 'Lenore,' 'Dreamland' & 'The Coliseum'" (Poe, *Letters* 450).

that one cannot defend the ideality of this poem without incurring some horrible, yet funny contradictions.

Like “Ligeia,” it is narrated in the first person. Indeed, the speaker includes himself explicitly in the scene he describes: “At midnight, in the month of June, / I stand beneath the mystic moon” (Poe, *Poems* 186). He is, therefore, talking a moonlight stroll. The time is *now*, which gives a sense of urgency to the poem. Then, this “I” describes the scenery: the haze that seemed to “exhale from” the Moon, and a lake that looks “like Lethe” (187). He is, most certainly, outdoors. Suddenly, however, the scene shifts: “All Beauty sleeps! — and lo! where lies / Irene, with her Destinies!” (187).<sup>139</sup> The smooth transition from the abstract to the concrete is remarkable. Sleeping beauty enters as *all* Beauty (with a capital B) sleeps. So far, the scene appears idyllic enough.

The second stanza opens:

Oh, Lady bright! can it be right –  
This window open to the night?  
The wanton airs, from the tree-top,  
Laughingly through the lattice drop –  
The bodiless airs, a wizard rout,  
Flit through thy chamber in and out,  
And wave the curtain canopy  
So fitfully — so fearfully –  
Above the closed and fringed lid  
‘Neath which thy slumb’ring soul lies hid,  
That, o’er the floor and down the wall,  
Like ghosts the shadows rise and fall!

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<sup>139</sup> Incidentally, this couplet has the only forced rhyme in the poem (“lies,” “destinies”). “Irene,” the original version of this poem, contained two forced rhymes: “skies,” “destinies,” in lines 23-24, and “canopy,” “eye,” in lines 35-36. Perhaps Poe intended to signal with this deviation from standard accepted pronunciation that the poet had the same morbid obsession with “eyes” that characterised the narrator of “Ligeia.”

Oh, lady dear, hast thou no fear? (Poe, *Poems* 187)

Fear? But what, may one ask, has she to fear from the open window? A chill? Surely not in June, and in so pleasant a night. Yet, however suitable a cause of fear for delicate young ladies this may, nevertheless seem, another possibility is intimated: ghosts. But who would fear such evidently counterfeit ghosts? In the following lines, however, the unnamed speaker suggests, without positively stating it, that the sleeping beauty may be dead—her appearance is ambiguous. But this does not make much sense either. If she was dead, she would be past fearing either chills or ghosts.

McGann suggests that the poet is in denial; that he lets himself imagine that a dead woman is only asleep. But that is not the actual meaning of the poem. Its tone of morbid sentimentality, it is true, is reminiscent of a kind of poetry, very popular in Poe's time, where a male voice speaks about, or rather to, a dead woman who appears to be only sleeping—Mabbott has identified some such poems from which Poe evidently drew inspiration for his.<sup>140</sup> But the feelings in Poe's poem are all topsy-turvy. Whereas those poems express the conventional sentimental desire that the "sleeping beauty" may awake—here, the speaker earnestly and passionately desires her *not* to awake:

The lady sleeps! Oh, may her sleep,  
Which is enduring, so be deep!  
Heaven have her in its sacred keep!  
This chamber changed for one more melancholy,  
I pray to God that she may lie  
Forever with unopened eye,  
While the pale sheeted ghosts go by! (Poe, *Poems* 188)

This is the kind of thing a sincere mourner would never say. But then, this man is evidently not a mourner. In fact, is the "sleeper" really dead at all? The idea that the woman seen through the

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140 In his introduction to "Irene and The Sleeper," Mabbott instances the obscure "Oh Lady, Love Awake! A Romance," by William Rufus, and "Edderline's Dream" by John Wilson (a.k.a. Christopher North), noting that "Poe practically quoted some of the phraseology" of the latter poem (*Complete Poems* 180, 181). The first of these poems deals with a dead woman, exploiting the analogy between sleep and death; Wilson's poem, on the other hand, deals with a sleeping woman who appears to be dying, but was in fact having a nightmare.

window is dead is inferred from the tone of the poem—or rather from its analogy with other poems —, but is not actually upheld by its sense. Indeed, the poet states, without ambiguity, that the woman “sleeps,” and this is corroborated by his claim that her “slumb’ring soul lies hid” beneath the eyelids. This means, of course, that the soul has not yet left the body, hence, that the “sleeper” still lives. The poet, therefore, far from lamenting the sleeping beauty’s death, appears to be actually *wishing* it:

My love, she sleeps! Oh, may her sleep,  
As it is lasting, so be deep!  
Soft may the worms about her creep!  
Far in the forest dim and old,  
For her may some tall vault unfold (...)  
(Poe, *Poems* 188)

In his *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (1941), Arthur Hobson Quinn wished, rather, the author could have “omitted” the third line in this passage “for which” he thought “no defence can be made” (185). Later, in his note to this verse, Mabbott conjectured that Poe “perhaps intended to make the worm a mystic symbol of immortality,” but agreed with “the reviewer in the *London Literary Gazette* of January 1846” that it was “‘morbid’” (*Complete Poems* 189n). Like McGann, these commentators thought that Poe had destroyed the impression of pure ideality which he intended to convey by a childish mistake. Responding to the critical outlook illustrated by these remarks, Susan Amper complained that “it would be nice to have a view of the works in which Poe is seen as having actually intended the effect he achieved” (“Masters of Deceit” 110).

In reality, however, the verse in question is not incongruous with the overall effect. For this is certainly not an example of the morbid sentimental poetry that was in fashion in Poe’s day. The poem embodies, rather, a sentimentality—if we may call it so—that is the precise opposite of mourning. Apparently, the speaker cherishes the hope that the lady may not be sleeping, but actually

dead. But then, that is not exactly it, either. To be precise, he expresses a desire that the lady might remain in this state of apparent death long enough for her to be conveyed to a tomb, which is described in very peculiar terms in the concluding lines of the poem:

Some sepulchre, remote, alone,  
Against whose portal she hath thrown,  
In childhood, many an idle stone –  
Some tomb from out whose sounding door  
She ne'er shall force an echo more,  
Thrilling to think, poor child of sin!  
It was the dead who groaned within. (Poe, *Poems* 188)

These lines evoke a thought that is even more appalling than the reference to the “worms:” premature burial. Now, the poet gives us to understand that, if only asleep—as he had indeed told she was—, the lady runs the risk of dying a horrible death. Even if someone happened to be passing by her “remote sepulchre,” which he intimates by that word would be very unlikely, the hypothetical passer-by would probably attribute any sound coming from inside the mausoleum to the action of some restless spirit of the dead. Now, finally, we understand that the sleeping beauty had a very good reason to be afraid: the creepy “poet” outside her window in whose shoes we have unwittingly stepped—whose thoughts, feelings, and even impressions, we have been forced to share.

And these are very vivid impressions. In fact, they conjure a very detailed picture. He was outside, under the moon, when he saw the lady through the window of her bedroom—which was open— “can it be right?” Apparently, he can hardly believe his luck. He also mentions that the “wanton airs” were “dropping” from the “tree-top” into the room. It must have been a high window. If so, it would appear that the poet had meanwhile climbed that very tree, and was himself on the point of “dropping” into the lady’s room. All indicates, indeed, that he was projecting his own



“wantonness” on the “airs.” When we finally get the joke, we just do not feel like laughing. Why, and how, could we have been taken in by such a ghastly hoax? This catastrophe of shame and horror, the terrible moment in which we recognise our blindness, is the femicide effect. There can be no doubt that this is the effect Poe achieved. I believe this was also the effect he intended.

### III – Poe, Godwin, Wollstonecraft



## **1 – A Learned Wife: Representations of Intellectual Women in the Gothic Fiction of Matthew Lewis, Walter Scott, and Poe**

The femicide story brought to a contemporary and ostensibly civilised setting the horrors by which the Gothic novel represented the vulnerable situation of women in a strict patriarchal society, making the perverse male tyrant the narrator of his own tale. He was no longer at a safe distance, in that barbarous setting, remote in time or space, where bluebeards and evil monks were said to dwell. The femicide might be our neighbour—or worse. He might be the reader's husband, or father, or perhaps the reader himself. Poe continued this tradition. The narrator of "Ligeia," for example, who married Rowena for the express purpose of imprisoning her, precisely, in a gloomy medieval tower, thus bringing to life the conventional Gothic metaphor of marriage, perfectly embodies the sort of tyranny that characterised the male villains in Radcliffe's novels. He asserts his absolute power over his wife, sanctioned by law and by the scientific authority represented in the tale by Rowena's physicians. He abuses that power to torment his new wife, and recognises that this gave him pleasure. Indeed, that appears to be the only pleasure he derived from their intercourse. This is a very good indication that, with him, sexual desire had been replaced by hostility for the object that inspired it. Strictly and literally speaking, this husband was never a lover, except to dead or dying women. And then there is the narrator of "Morella," who imprisons his own daughter, confines her exclusively to his society, and lives with her as he had lived with her mother. He evokes another of the recurrent nightmares of the Gothic: incest.

However, there is something about these two tales that was entirely unprecedented in the Gothic. "Morella" and "Ligeia" are monuments to dead female intellectuals by a male spouse, who suggests his intercourse with his wife was chiefly, indeed exclusively intellectual. This is a very specific idea—one might say a suspiciously unique idea, and one which Poe did not get from any of the many sensationalist narratives we have looked at up until now. This idea is a departure not only from typical Gothic conventions, and from the template of the femicide story that developed from it,

but even from Poe's early experiments with the femicide narrator. Indeed, in the previous chapter, we have looked at many tales of femicide that have provided inspiration for different aspects of "Morella" and "Ligeia," but in these the female victim is never intellectually remarkable. Characters like Mary Elliston, the wives in Bulwer-Lytton's and Dickens's similarly titled "madman" tales, or even the harassed heroines of Radcliffe's novels may be granted sensibility and intuition, the classic traits of the sentimental conception of the ideal woman, but have no literary, philosophical, scientific, or political ambitions of their own, and therefore pose no challenge to the male intellectual monopoly.

The male narrators of Macnish's and Dickens's femicide tales are themselves intellectually unremarkable. The narrator of Bulwer-Lytton's "Manuscript Found in a Madhouse," however, is different in this respect. Unlike his peers, he is exceedingly proud of his learning, which he displays whenever he gets the chance. This is a feature he shares with the narrators of Poe's first three tales named after women, "Berenice," "Morella," and "Ligeia," the last of which even contains, as we have seen, a learned allusion that Poe lifted from Bulwer-Lytton's tale. Egæus, the hero and narrator of the first of these tales, is paradigmatic in this respect. He claims to be descended from a long line of scholars, even making the implausible assertion that he was born in the rich library of his forefathers. His pedantry affects not only his diction, but even the way he goes about trying to account for what happened to him. Indeed, he intimates the existence of some obscure mystical connection between the strange events he narrates and the books he was reading at the time: he alludes to St. Austin's *The City of God*; "well remember[s]" a little-known treatise by "the noble Italian, Cælius Secundus Curio, '*The Amplitudine Beati Regni Dei*;' quotes from "Tertullian's '*De Carne Christi*,'" in the original Latin, of course; and bases a simile on a passage of the equally obscure Ptolemy Hephestion (Poe, "Berenice" 213).<sup>141</sup> These texts function as intimations that

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<sup>141</sup> Incidentally, this allusion is, as so often happens in Poe's tales, incorrect. As usual, Mabbott registers the fact but offers very little in the way of explanation. Poe appears to have found the reference in Bryant's *Ancient Mythology*. Bryant, in turn, got his information from a fellow compiler, Photius, a Patriarch of the church of Constantinople who lived in the 9th century A.D. All these sources mention, however, a "blade of grass," *not* the Asphodel. "Poe seems to have reasoned," Mabbott writes, "if grass, why not better Asphodel, a symbol of death." (*Tales* 1:220n9).

something of the nature of resurrection may have happened to his cousin Berenice. However, he himself intimates a perfectly natural alternative explanation of which he appears to have been unaware. In this sense, then, his very “learning” appears to have misled him into superstition.

However, Egæus does not say whether any of the Berenices, the dark ghost and the living blonde, shared his love of rare old books. What particularly distinguishes Morella and Ligeia from all their predecessors in previous iterations of the femicide story, then, is that they are themselves ostensibly depicted as scholars and philosophers. Not only that, they became their husbands’ teachers. The ostensible purpose of their narrative, then, is that of telling the story of an incredibly learned woman. At the same time, however, the narrators of those two tales profit from the occasion to display their own learning, and promote their ambitions.

Morella and Ligeia are all the more remarkable as, in the Gothic, female characters who excelled in philosophy, science, or any discipline requiring abstract thought and the ability to generalise ideas, which were then generally thought to be male prerogatives, were extremely rare. But then, female philosophers, who competed with their male counterparts on an equal footing, were, in those days, as rare in real life as they were in fiction. In this sense, the Gothic was a faithful representation of the society of the epoch in which it flourished. Poe’s eulogiums of a female intellectual by her husband were, however, not *entirely* unprecedented. There was one significant and notorious real-life precedent, and one only, for this: Godwin’s book about his first wife, the feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft, *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798). I believe that Poe wrote “Morella” and “Ligeia” with this text in mind.

In fact, there were so few women who had made a name for themselves in philosophy, that a man in a situation similar to that of Poe’s narrators, that is, a man who had married a female

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I believe Poe intended, first, to indicate that the proud Egæus was quoting from memory; secondly, to indicate, through the simile, the true nature of the narrator’s condition, and thirdly that he himself was not aware of it. Egæus, says his “reason” was “shaken from its balance only by trivial things,” and for that resembled Hephestion’s “ocean-crag” which “trembled only to the touch of the flower called Asphodel” (Poe, “Berenice” 213). However, whereas the “blade of grass” of the original is, indeed, the very symbol of triviality, the Asphodel is not a “trivial thing.” It is a symbol of death, and that does make a difference. Through the botched simile, the narrator subverts his own discourse, once again suggesting the obvious solution to the mystery of his fainting spells: necrophilia.

philosopher, and, after her death, had written an account of the time he spent with her is even more of a rarity. In *English Letters* it was, indeed, more than a rarity—it was an absolute singularity. Among England’s more famous men of letters, only Godwin had written anything that was at all comparable with Poe’s tales. And the story of Godwin and Wollstonecraft was by no means forgotten in Poe’s day. On the contrary, a series of scandals, the first of which was precisely that occasioned by Godwin’s biography of Wollstonecraft, boosted the notoriety of the two already well-known radical thinkers.

The couple had been together for little over a year when Wollstonecraft died from childbirth complications in September 10, 1797. Before July 1796 they had been virtually strangers to each other. By January 1798 Godwin, assuming the role of literary executor of his wife, had printed a selection of her unpublished works, under the title *Posthumous Works of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which was accompanied by a hastily assembled account of the life of the author entitled *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Like the narrators of “Ligeia” and “Morella,” Godwin complained of having little information about his wife’s life prior to their acquaintance, and, therefore, he admits, the portion of his text which deals with that period contains many gaps. Poe’s tales are particularly reminiscent of the last two chapters in Godwin’s biography. The first of these narrates their brief courtship, and the period of their cohabitation; the second is entirely devoted to what he calls “the last fatal scene” of Wollstonecraft’s life, from the time she went into labor to her death (Godwin, *Memoirs* 112).<sup>142</sup>

In a letter to Philip Pendleton Cooke to which I have already alluded, Poe indicated that he regarded the two tales under analysis as a unit within his fiction.<sup>143</sup> Taken together, the parallel with Godwin’s book becomes, in my opinion, even more striking. Morella dies giving birth to a child that

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142 The quotation is from a passage of the first edition, of January 1796, of the *Memoirs*, which Godwin retouched for the revised edition of August of the same year.

143 This is the letter dated September 12, 1839: “The *gradual* perception of the fact that Ligeia lives again in the person of Rowena, is a far loftier and more thrilling idea than the one I have embodied. (...) And this idea was mine—had I never written before I should have adopted it—but then there was Morella. (...) Since Morella is on record, I will suffer Ligeia to remain as it is” (Poe, *Letters* 193).

would be named after her—so did Mary Wollstonecraft, who died eleven days after she gave birth to a female child, the writer Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, later Shelley, whose life would, like that of her parents, be involved in scandal. Ligeia, on the other hand, not only speaks in a style that is highly reminiscent of Wollstonecraft's, but is also posthumously spiritualised, or rather sentimentalised by her husband in a way that resembles Godwin's handling of his wife's story.

In *Memoirs*, Godwin revealed details of Wollstonecraft's private life which were unacceptable according to the moral standards of his time, thereby contributing decisively for the neglect into which her work, and particularly her most famous and ambitious book have fallen in the following decades. Indeed, it is unanimously recognised that he “effectively buried his wife for the next two hundred years by telling the world that she had had attempted suicide twice and conceived two children out of wedlock;” and also that he “effectively entombed her books for decades” with her (Ayres, *Betwixt* 16, 36). If, as Pamela Clemit and Gina Luria Walker write, “Wollstonecraft remained a potent, if publicly unacknowledged, presence,” this is due, for better and worse, to Godwin's book, who kept her in the public eye, while also making her name taboo: “The popular counter-revolutionary interpretation of the *Memoirs* as a work which yoked radicalism, feminism, and sexual immorality,” these critics write, “continued to shape attitudes to the lives and writings of both authors well into the nineteenth century” (35, 11-12). Yet, since Wollstonecraft's late nineteenth-century revival, the tendency has been to excuse Godwin's indiscretions, under the assumption that he had a right to expose his partner's life as if it was his own, and even to make confessions in her name. This took for granted that they were, for all intents and purposes, as one. And thus, his book has itself been granted, for all practical purposes, the status of an autobiography.

Brenda Ayres, however, has recently challenged what has become the official interpretation of *Memoirs*, according to which the book is, as Clemit had put it, a form of ““innocuous (...) self-scrutiny”” (qtd. in Ayres, *Betwixt* 26). Ayres argues that the insensibility to the potential effects of



his book implied by such interpretations is not plausible: “Was Godwin really so naïve to think that society was going to tolerate such blatant defiance of social conventions? Did he really have no idea that by proffering his own agenda in writing Wollstonecraft’s story the way he did would effectively bury Wollstonecraft’s work with her which is exactly what happened?” (*Betwixt* 26).

Ayres also accuses other critics of overlooking the fact that Godwin systematically erased Wollstonecraft’s “identity,” “not only by publishing information about her alongside his social subversion,” that is, by appropriating her figure to his political agenda, “but also by overriding her belief systems with his own and by flagrantly disregarding facts about her life which resulted in debasing it and her works” (*Betwixt* 26). Indeed, very few have recognised that Godwin destroyed not only Wollstonecraft’s reputation as a woman, but also her reputation as a thinker, which it was the declared purpose of his book to promote.

This contrast between the proposed ends and the actual effects of the text is something Godwin’s *Memoirs* has in common with Poe’s tales of women. Like Poe’s narrators, although he keeps telling us how wonderful his wife was, Godwin actually damns her character and demeans her intellectual achievements. He does this, moreover, in such a way that we get the impression not only that he did not mean to revile his wife, but that he was not even aware of how damaging his text really was for her reputation. It is as if the actual effect of his writing was involuntary; as if the writer himself had not been aware of his fundamental ambivalence towards his subject. Again, this is precisely the impression we get from Poe’s narrators, who effectively suggest the wives after which they long were overbearing witches. Like them, Godwin claims to have been moved to writing only by selfless motives, but ends up promoting himself at the expense of his wife, as if he did not mean to. This, as Ayres points out, is simply not credible. She argues that the conventional reading of *Memoirs* is based on a too simplistic assessment of his motives. I have made a similar argument for Poe’s narrators, who I believe, are not what they affect to be, that is, impartial reporters.

The ambivalence of these men towards their remarkable subject, moreover, is complicated by gender issues. All of them resort to conventional sentimental representations of womanhood to suggest that the intellectual efforts of the remarkable women whose story they tell were somehow fundamentally flawed because they were women. In this sense, Godwin, like the narrators of “Morella” and “Ligeia” may be said to have spiritualised Wollstonecraft out of this world.

I do not believe that all these similarities may be described as coincidences. I believe Poe deliberately created fictional analogues of Godwin’s rewriting of Wollstonecraft in order to highlight the subterranean motivations of such writing. Godwin and Poe’s narrators engage in a surreptitious form of character assassination, but not just any kind of character assassination. Godwin’s misdeed is the literary equivalent of femicide, and the similarities between his rhetoric and that of Poe’s narrators highlights this fact. This, I believe, was intended on Poe’s part.

In order to argue this point, I shall look very closely at Godwin’s text throughout this chapter. My motive for doing this is not to demonstrate that Godwin’s text is marred by his resentment for a woman that threatened his sense of manhood. That point has, I think, been argued very persuasively by Brenda Ayres. My purpose in paying so much attention to Godwin’s seemingly unintended meaning, to the subtle ways in which he reviles and demeans Wollstonecraft even while protesting his love and admiration, is to show just how much these sly hints resemble those in Poe’s tales, and how they produce similar seemingly unintended effects.

Poe’s narrators were oppressed by the mystery of their wives; and so was Godwin. He felt powerless to describe “the personal pleasures I enjoyed in her conversation (...) They can be measured only by the treasures of her mind, and the virtues of her heart. But this is a subject for meditation, not for words” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 120-121). Despite his declared inability to describe the charms of Wollstonecraft’s conversation, however, Godwin waxed eloquent about her supposed flaws. His derogatory comments about her grammar, style, and the accusations of shoddy thinking, all of which many were content to attribute to the author’s supposed uncompromising candour—the

same candour which led him to confess his wife's secrets as if they were *his* secrets—, did not help Wollstonecraft's reputation.

But even worse than his unduly harsh criticism, are his compliments. These had a far greater, and more lasting negative impact on her reputation. Godwin presented the author of *A Vindication* as an unpleasant and overbearing virago, whose greatest achievements were the result, not of intelligence, but of something else, a sort of instinctive sensibility he emphatically distinguished from the abilities that were required of a philosopher. In fact, Godwin effectively turns the reader away from *A Vindication*, which he considers a failed book, on the grounds that it was unduly “masculine”—the kind of book, he contends, that his wife, being a woman, and in fact a particularly pure specimen of pure, spiritual femininity, was constitutionally unfit to pen. She was, he said, really made to make a man happy—but she spent most of her life running away from herself. In this sense, the parallel with “Morella” and “Ligeia” is again striking.

Susan Amper argues convincingly that the narrator of one of Poe's earlier tales, “The Assination,” killed its Byron-like hero:

I believe the real subject of the tale is not Byron or Byronism but specifically Moore's biography of Byron. Poe fastens on the malice in Moore's profile that shows plainly through his effusive flattery of his famous subject. Poe creates a similar duplicity in the relationship of his narrator to the Byronic hero and dramatizes the relationship by making the narrator the actual murderer of the hero.

(“The Biographer as Assassin” 14)

In those days, even those who had been shocked by Byron's disregard for the moral conventions of his time thought that Moore had shamefully stabbed—metaphorically speaking—a friend in the back, exploiting his privileged position to get rid of a rival in the race for literary fame, promoting his own reputation at the expense of his famous friend in the process. According to Amper's interpretation, the murder of the charismatic hero of “The Assination” by the narrator was

both a metaphor and a caricature of the sort of devious character assassination in which many thought Moore had engaged under pretext of celebrating his friend. I will argue that in “Ligeia” and in “Morella” femicide is, likewise, a metaphor of what Godwin did to Wollstonecraft. I will try to show that Poe deliberately imitated the ambivalent tone of Godwin’s biography of Wollstonecraft in “Morella” and “Ligeia” in the same way that he had modelled the tone of the “The Assignation” on Moore’s biography of Byron.

If anything, the feeling of inferiority of the biographer towards his extraordinary subject is, in my opinion, even more glaring in Godwin’s text than it is in Moore’s. But this feeling is complicated, in *Memoirs*, by gender issues. Indeed, “Morella” and “Ligeia” are notable for presenting a picture in which the status quo of the relations between the sexes is significantly inverted. “Morella’s erudition was profound. As I hope to live, her talents were of no common order—her powers of mind were gigantic,” says the narrator of the first (Poe, “Morella” 229). Likewise, according to her husband, “the learning of Ligeia (...) was immense,” “such as I have never known in woman,” and her “acquisitions (...) were gigantic, were astounding” (Poe, “Ligeia” 315). Due to their proficiency in intellectual exploits habitually pursued by men, these women are therefore perceived by their husbands as unfeminine. Indeed, by indicating that they were not sexually interested in these women—an odd circumstance considering they are talking of their wives—these men help establish the perception that they were sexually aberrant. Indeed, they tacitly construe their intellectual exploits as the product of some fundamental sexual deviation.

Thus, Poe’s narrators indirectly reinforce what Wollstonecraft’s friend Mary Hays (1759-1843) described in her profile of Catharine Macaulay (1731-1791) as a common preconception concerning women of learning. Indeed, Macaulay resembled Poe’s heroines in many respects. She was an accomplished scholar, versed in both ancient and modern languages, whose *History of England* boldly challenged the traditional notion of the separate spheres of male and female intellect, and with it the idea of woman’s constitutional unfitness for abstract thought or sustained

intellectual effort. Hays wrote of her: “the universal information which her conversation displayed, appeared to her auditors not less admirable than her historical acquisitions, and the powers of her mind. Her brilliant talents for conversation, with the variety of her knowledge, and the vivacity of her imagination, rendered her a most interesting and instructive companion” (Hays, “Catherine Macaulay Graham” 298).

Here we find, incidentally, the same ideas expressed by Poe’s narrators when talking of their extraordinary wives, often clothed in the same words: universal erudition, extensive “acquisitions,” remarkable “powers of mind,” great “talents,” such as had seldom been possessed by a woman, were Macaulay’s glories. But Hays goes on to point out that, owing to the prevalent masculinist prejudices, such exceptional women had habitually been perceived as “unsexed” freaks.<sup>144</sup> It was supposed that their success in fields traditionally dominated by men came at the price of their “sensibility,” which, in the sentimental language of the day, was identified with womanhood. Thus, intellectual women were seen as failed, or frustrated women, and this created a bias that prevented their works from being judged according to their merits:

A female historian, by its singularity, could not fail to excite attention: she seemed to have stepped out of the province of her sex; curiosity was sharpened, and malevolence provoked. The author was attacked by petty and personal scurrilities, to which it was believed her sex would render her vulnerable. Her talents and powers could not be denied; her beauty was therefore brought into question, as if it was at all concerned with the subject; or that, to instruct our understandings, it was necessary at the same time to charm our senses. “She is deformed” (said her adversaries, wholly unacquainted with her person), “she is unfortunately ugly, she despairs of distinction and admiration as a woman, she seeks, therefore, to encroach on the province of man.” (“Catharine Macaulay Graham,” 292)

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144 A satirical poem attributed to Richard Polwhele, written against Mary Wollstonecraft and other notable female intellectuals was entitled, precisely, *The Unsex’d Females* (1798).

The narrators of Poe's tales about learned women slyly confirm the prejudice which in effect rendered any successful woman intellectual suspect of being not quite a woman. These narrators perceive their wives through the traditional stereotypical representation of the woman who overreaches the limits imposed on her sex in a patriarchal society by striving after knowledge: the witch. As I have before stated, women with intellectual ambitions were, in those days, as rare in fiction as they were in real life. One rare, and therefore remarkable, exception to this rule is Matthew Lewis's Matilda, for whose charms the monk Ambrosio originally broke his vow of chastity. Ambrosio fell in love with this androgynous character when he still thought that *she* was a *he*. Indeed, the novice Rosario, for whom, as we have seen, Ambrosio was terribly attracted, suddenly and conveniently turned into a lush female by the name of Matilda as the monk was on the point of sexually assaulting him. Along with this personal transgenderism, this character also exhibits what may be termed a mental, or intellectual transgenderism.

Matilda seduced Ambrosio, actively harassing him, while still impersonating the male novice Rosario. This is, in itself, a breach of traditional gender roles, for man was supposed to play the active part in the game of seduction. Yet, during that period, and immediately after her transformation, Matilda, although assuming the initiative, adopted a docile and ingenuous, conventionally feminine manner, which allowed Ambrosio to imagine he had the upper hand. Indeed, being subjected to a vow of chastity, the situation of the monk was socially comparable to that of a woman, whose virtue was identified with chastity, and Matthew Lewis deftly exploited this analogy to explode gender conventions. These conventions are subjected to an additional strain, however, for Matilda, in disguising her sexual desire under a submissive, ingenuous cape, and acting out what was then commonly perceived as a feminine role, follows the practice of the male gallant. In this sense, Matilda's very womanliness, being false and designed to lure the monk to break his chastity, was, under the prevailing values of Lewis's time, typically masculine. Ultimately,

the sort of strain to which the patriarchal ideology is subjected challenges the conception of sex in terms of a dominance-submission relationship.

Indeed, Matilda, advocating the pursue of pleasure in defiance of conventional morals, uses the typical rhetoric of an Eighteenth-century male libertine.<sup>145</sup> On the one hand, she asks Ambrosio to “[f]orget that I am a Woman,” and to “[c]onsider me only as a Friend,” thus explicitly replacing the conventional hierarchical conception of sexual relationships by one established on an equalitarian basis; on the other hand, she acknowledges that “love the most impetuous, the most unbounded, has induced me to disguise my sex,” a behaviour which constitutes a breach of the passive role women were conventionally assigned in amorous transactions (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 63). Indeed, at a time when women were chiefly regarded as passive sexual partners, she openly and unabashedly assumes her sexual desire: “I lust for the enjoyment of your person. The Woman reigns in my bosom, and I am become a prey to the wildest of passions. Away with friendship! ‘tis a cold, unfeeling word. My bosom burns with love, with unutterable love, and love must be its return” (89). This is a clear departure from the conventional sexual mores represented by her counterpart, the ingenuous Antonia, whom her mother had preserved from any knowledge of sex, even going so far as to expunge any erotic content from her copy of the Bible. At a time when female sexual desire was a taboo, Lewis depicts a woman who assumes her lust, and this is certainly not the least of Matilda the witch’s moral transgressions.

In fact, the typical contemporary depiction of sexual acts usually implied the wide-spread view that only the male derived pleasure from such exchanges, or at least that it was not proper or natural for a woman to enjoy them. Yet, in a passage the implied erotic content of which seems to have been lost on Lewis’s contemporaries, the narrator gives us to understand that the first time Matilda “enjoyed” the monk’s “person” he was the one who had taken no pleasure out of it. During

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<sup>145</sup> The phrase “male libertine” was, indeed, something of a pleonasm in those days. In the sense that has reference to sexual mores, the term “libertine” was, according to the *OED*, “[r]arely applied to a woman,” and is therefore defined as follows: “A man who is not restrained by moral law, esp[ecially] in his relations with the female sex” (def. A.3).

a *rendezvous* with her, soon after she had revealed her true sexual identity to him, Ambrosio is stung by a “Cientipedor,” a fabulous poisonous insect that commentators have never been able to identify, and is declared beyond hope by his brethren, who carry him to his quarters: “Rosario alone remained in the Cell, the Abbott at his earnest entreaty having been committed to his care. Ambrosio’s strength worn out by the violence of his exertions, He had by this time fallen into a profound sleep. So totally was He overcome by weariness, that He scarcely gave any signs of life” (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 71-72). During the period in which he was left alone with the false Rosario, the monk unaccountably regains his health—Matilda later tells him that she had sucked the venom out of his wound while he slept. But the monk, of course, was struggling with two infections: the literal, providential one, from which he would soon recover, and the far more dangerous metaphorical “infection” of sexual desire, from which he would never recover. This fact introduces a comical undertow of meaning to the following exchange between Matilda and the monk, which takes place after the latter regains his senses:

“I am appointed your nurse, and you must not disobey my orders.”

“You are in spirits, Matilda!” [Ambrosio, knowing they are alone, uses her true name.]

“Well may I be so: I have just received a pleasure unexampled through my whole life.”

“What was that pleasure?”

“What I must conceal from all, but most from you.” (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 74)

Surprisingly, Lewis let this passage stand in the censored fourth edition of the novel. And yet, there is good reason to suspect Matilda “enjoyed” an unconscious Ambrosio, as he would himself later “enjoy” a senseless Antonia. Moreover, Matilda is evidently alluding to sexual “pleasure.” Thus, this episode challenges the conventional patriarchal conception of womanhood in a very obvious way. For the passage implies that women were not really incapable of sexual



enjoyment, as was generally supposed, but rather that, in order to comply with the unrealistic expectations the typical male of Lewis's time, represented in the novel by Ambrosio, they had to affect frigidity. This episode constitutes, indeed, one of the best illustrations of the way in which Lewis subverted the typical patriarchal outlook on sexuality. It should also be noticed, moreover, that the emancipated Matilda also reserved herself the right to choose her partners, and would later refuse sexual intercourse with an estranged Ambrosio. "I am no Prostitute," she tells him, "My person is become indifferent to you, and 'tis necessity, not love, which makes you seek my enjoyment" (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 380). Again, Matilda's sexual assertiveness is positively extraordinary in the literature of the time. The Gothic disguise, however, made it possible for Lewis to present such deviant representations of womanhood, although, as we have seen, once the identity of the author became known, he was forced to bowdlerise this and many other passages.

Indeed, it appears to me that the truly subversive content of Lewis's novel has been persistently devalued by twentieth century critics, which have generally deemed his novel innocuous and timid, thus obscuring, I think, the historical and cultural significance of his work. André Parreaux, for example, wrote:

The scenes of 'lust' no longer move either to rapture or indignation, as they did the critic of 1796-98. They sometimes look faintly ludicrous with their rather awkward artificiality—for instance when Matilda confesses to Ambrosio: 'I lust for the enjoyment of your person (...)

Why would Mat Lewis write such nonsense? Was it because the juvenile writer had so little experience of the realities of sex? And why does his language, when dealing with them sound so abominably formal—even more than obscene?

(*The Publication* 131-32).

Louis F. Peck expressed a similar view in *A Life of Matthew Lewis*: "Though some of the original passages [in the first three editions of *The Monk*] display execrable lack of taste, it is hard

to believe that they ever had power to harm the world. (...) At nineteen Lewis' was inexperienced and overconfident and wrote without concern for the prejudices of the day, a freedom which he never again allowed himself" (35).

It appears to me, rather, that, however inexperienced he might have been, Lewis was evidently very much concerned with those "prejudices." Indeed his bad taste appears to me a deliberate attempt to ridicule them. For the first time in many years, a popular novel presented a positively libertine depiction of sexuality. Whereas his contemporaries, responding to increasingly stringent moral and religious conventions, were presenting procreation as the only natural and legitimate end of sex, Lewis explicitly presented it as the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake. This emancipation of sexuality from reproduction, of course, paved the way for the recognition of homosexual love, and this is given added visibility by the tension to which conventional gender roles are subjected in the novel.

More recent criticism has proved itself more sensitive to the destabilising tendency of the Gothic. In *Queer Gothic*, for example, George E. Haggerty points out that "[n]o matter how tidy, no marriage at the close of the gothic novel can entirely dispel the thrilling dys- (or different) functionality at the heart of the Gothic;" but mitigates this assertion by adding: "I cannot make too broad a claim because these fictions never significantly challenge the 'dominant fiction' of the age" (3). This episode in *The Monk*, however, very obviously challenges that fiction. But that challenge is, nonetheless, cloaked in sentimental clichés, which are made awkward, and even ridiculous by the context. Thus, I think *The Monk* provides perhaps the most relevant precedent for the kind of subversion that Poe attempted in his tales. More precisely, Poe appears to me to be clearly indebted to Lewis for his "bad taste." Indeed, Lewis's and Poe's revision of culturally coded sentimental categories is more comprehensive in its scope, and more radical in its tendency, than all the other Gothic fictions we have looked at, with the possible exception of Radcliffe's novels. The fact that their unorthodoxy went for the most part unnoticed rather strengthens my point. They subverted the

common sentimental language of their time in a way that allowed them to disguise their purpose. Their insidious work of cultural terrorism, I think, is only comparable, in its time, to Wollstonecraft's rewriting of culturally coded gender roles.

Indeed, the behaviour of Matilda is shockingly "masculine." Initially, the monk was flattered by Rosario-Matilda's apparent veneration for him, and saw her as his disciple. After seducing him, however, she revealed herself to be much bolder, more intelligent, and more learned than the ignorant and pusillanimous Ambrosio. She showed herself, that is, clearly his superior in every respect. Recognising this superiority, the monk submitted to her, and the gender roles were then more explicitly inverted than before. As a result, Matilda became repugnant to him, for he no longer perceived her as a woman:

Left to himself He could not reflect without surprise on the sudden change in Matilda's character and sentiments. But a few days had past, since She appeared the mildest and softest of her sex, devoted to his will, and looking up to him as a superior Being. Now she assumed a sort of courage and manliness in her manners and discourse but ill calculated to please him. She spoke no longer to insinuate, but command: He found himself unable to cope with her in argument, and was unwillingly obliged to confess the superiority of her judgement. Every moment convinced him of the astonishing powers of her mind: But what She gained in the opinion of the Man, She lost with interest in the affection of the Lover. He regretted Rosario, the fond, the gentle, and submissive: He grieved, that Matilda preferred the virtues of his sex to those of her own. (M. Lewis, *The Monk* 231-32)

According to the conventional patriarchal ideology, woman was naturally submissive because physically weaker and intellectually inferior to man—indeed, submissiveness was regarded as the defining trait of female behaviour. Matilda, however, having first submitted Ambrosio

sexually, proceeded to submit him intellectually. Therefore, according to that same ideology, she was “masculine,” and had forced the monk to be “feminine.”

On this point, J.-J. Rousseau’s sensibilities agree with the monk’s: “la femme est faite pour plaire et pour être subjuguée;” and again, “il est dans l’ordre de la nature que la femme obéisse à l’homme” (*Émile* 446). According to the French philosopher, this was the “natural” origin of male and female roles: “De là naissent l’attaque et la défense, l’audace d’un sexe et la timidité de l’autre, enfin la modestie et la honte dont la nature arma le faible pour asservir le fort” (447). The supposed natural modesty of woman, he adds, was necessary to prod man into using his force: “L’art le plus sûr d’animer cette force est de la rendre nécessaire par la résistance” (446). Implied in such statements, of course, is the idea that sexually assertive women emasculated her male lovers. Intellectually, their submission should, according to Rousseau, be as complete: “La raison des femmes est une raison pratique qui leur fait trouver très habilement les moyens d’arriver à une fin connue, mais qui ne leur fait pas trouver cette fin” (472). It follows that the male lover should always be the teacher, and the female his pupil. These are views to which Wollstonecraft objected in *A Vindication* in the strongest possible terms.

In fact, Wollstonecraft reduced to the absurd the view that identified submissiveness with femininity, by remarking that soldiers, vulgarly regarded as the epitome of manliness, were trained to be submissive; to have no will of their own, and never to think by themselves. If a woman who does not think of man as a superior being was deemed “masculine,” then, in the name of consistency, a soldier should be regarded as a “feminine” man. But soldiers were not naturally submissive or irrational; their education made them so, and the same, Wollstonecraft thought, was the case with women, whose behavior, she remarked, was significantly analogous with that of soldiers in times of peace:

As a proof that education gives this appearance of weakness to females, we may instance the example of military men, who are, like them, sent into the world before

their minds have been stored with knowledge or fortified by principles. (...) Soldiers, as well as women, practice the minor virtues with punctilious politeness. Where is then the sexual difference, when the education has been the same? All the difference that I can discern, arises from the superior advantage of liberty, which enables the former to see more of life.

(...) And as for any depth of understanding, I will venture to affirm, that it is as rarely to be found in the army as amongst women; and the cause, I maintain, is the same. It may be further observed, that officers are also particularly attentive to their persons, fond of dancing, crowded rooms, adventures, and ridicule. Like the *fair* sex, the business of their life is gallantry. — They were taught to please, and they only live to please. Yet they do not lose their rank in the distinction of sexes, for they are still ranked superior to women, though in what their superiority consists, beyond what I have just mentioned, it is difficult to discover. (*Vindication* 92-93)

Matthew Lewis, of course, in the passage transcribed above, subverts the patriarchal ideology in a similar way. According to Ambrosio's notions of gender, Matilda had the mind of a man in the body of a woman. The monk found this appalling, and longed for the lost Rosario, who was, or appeared to be—which, in this context, makes very little practical difference—a woman trapped in a man's body. The real Matilda, on the contrary, because she assumed control over her sexual life, openly seeking the satisfaction of her desires, instead of submitting to his, did not correspond to his fantasies. Ambrosio, like William the femicide and Poe's narrators, had a craving for a passive sexual partner that nothing but a dead or senseless woman could satisfy. This is what makes the episode of Ambrosio's "rape" so interesting. By the providential intervention of the "cientipedoro," the monk broke his vow of chastity without pleasure, and through no conscious transgression, thus assuming a distinctly female role, as it was coded by the culture of Lewis's time.

The opposition between learning and womanhood which underlies Ambrosio's sentiments is the same that supports the prejudice against female intellectuals referred by Mary Hays. It is also inherent to the rhetoric of Morella's and Ligeia's husbands, who also suggest that a woman must either teach her husband, and be "unsexed," or love him in a submissively "feminine" way. Intellectual ambition, or any form of ambition for that matter, is thus construed as being fundamentally "unfeminine."

But that is certainly not the only form the resentment of Poe's narrators takes. It is impossible not to notice the extravagant praise they lavish on the seemingly supernatural "acquisitions" of their wives. However, without ever using that ugly word, as if they did not know what they were doing, the biographers force us to conclude that their subjects were witches, thus damning the very learning they appear to be praising, while reinforcing the same tendency to regard learning in a woman as a demonical prodigy that underlies Glanvill's theories as well as Ambrosio's sudden repulsion for Matilda.

Mabbott, responding to the seemingly unintended effect of the rhetoric of the tale, writes that Morella, for example, "seems to have taken a dangerous interest in black magic, for her invocation of the Blessed Virgin (in earlier versions of the story) is appropriate to a repentant witch," he tells us, without noticing the prayer, addressed to "Sancta Maria," is also suitable for would-be mothers—after all, she *was* pregnant; as for Ligeia, Mabbott is quite certain that she was "a magician or alchemist" (*Tales* 222n, 330n1). This is certainly what the narrators are driving at—but their pride is implicated in their narrative, and this discredits their testimony.

Whether he realises it or not, the supposed fact of his wife being a witch, compensates the husband-biographer's evident feeling of inferiority. In praising her "unfeminine" achievements he effectively depicts his subject as a freakish undead monster. In this capacity, Ligeia and Morella appear typical iterations of the old stereotypical representation of deviant femaleness, the monstrous woman which "incarnate[s] male dread of women and, specifically, male scorn of female creativity"

(Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 29). Male anxiety regarding the woman intellectual, as would be expected, became more acute as women's role in public life became more active. It developed into a veritable hysteria. As Wendy Martin remarks, "in the nineteenth century this fear of the intellectual woman became so intense that the phenomenon (...) was recorded in medical annals" (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 56). Poe's narrators, like Ambrosio the monk, seem to be afflicted by this hysteria to a very remarkable degree.

The reader may easily overlook how much these men resented the ascendancy their wives had over them, but this is due to Poe's skill at sleight of hand. Apparently, the husband submitted to the magistry of his wife with grace, even cheerfulness and, for a while at least, until she suffered a strange change—for both Morella and Ligeia changed in a way that did not please their husbands sometime previously to their death—, was perfectly content to lead a peaceful existence of study and sexual abstinence—truly a monastic life. The narrator of Morella tells us he "felt" his wife's superiority, "and in many matters became her pupil" (Poe, "Morella" 225); "I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigations at which I was so busily occupied during the earlier years of our marriage," says the narrator of "Ligeia" (Poe, 316).

Yet, although her learning extended to widely varied areas, the only branch of knowledge in which the narrator of "Ligeia" actually recognised his wife was an expert, and he a mere tyro, is qualified as "chaotic," and thus implicitly disparaged. Soon the "chaotic" domain of "metaphysics" becomes identified with "a wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden!," and quickly becomes obliquely identified with alchemy and necromancy (Poe "Ligeia" 316). And then, the narrator convinces himself, and does a good job of convincing his reader too, that Ligeia came back from the grave, a wonder that would indicate that she had indeed attained a forbidden knowledge, the nature of which appears to be thus definitely settled in a way that confirms all the ominous hints that had been thrown in the way of the reader to the effect that she had been studying evil.

Likewise, the narrator of “Morella” chooses to mention only one of the many topics that interested his wife. He claims she was obsessed with a sort of book that serious scholars would never touch, and if this reading became his obsession too, this was entirely owing to her influence:

I soon, however, found that, perhaps on account of her Presburg education, she placed before me a number of those mystical writings which are usually considered the mere dross of the early German literature. These, for what reason I could not imagine, were her favorite and constant study—and that, in process of time they became my own, should be attributed to the simple but effectual influence of habit and example. (Poe, “Morella” 230)

Thus, the narrator defers all responsibility for the choice of his readings, to which he later refers as “forbidden pages,” over to his teacher, Morella, making it impossible to miss that he meant witchcraft.<sup>146</sup> He carefully selects the “wildest” of her readings, preparing his reader to receive the apparent reincarnation of Morella, in the body of her daughter, as an indication that her interest in the subject was not purely academic, and that she had successfully sought the cursed knowledge that enabled her to perform such wonders. To put it bluntly, she too was a witch.

Despite their wives’ uncommonly comprehensive learning, which extended to all branches of knowledge, then, the husbands claim that the lessons they received from them were chiefly or exclusively concerned with a very narrow field of studies which they proceed to revile by implication. Thus, they effectively reiterate the notion that all lawful knowledge is “forbidden” to women. Still, Poe’s narrators are way too sly for univocal statements. All Morella’s husband knew, was that the “mystical writings” which interested her had fallen in disrepute, and that they were

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146 In an early incomplete draft of the tale (Mabbott’s text A, a complete transcription of which appears in his edition of the *Tales*), the narrator affected even greater ignorance: “Rare and rich volumes were opened for my use; but my wife, perhaps influenced by her Presburg education, laid before me, as I took occasion to remark, chiefly those speculative writings which have, from causes to me unknown, been neglected in these latter days, and thrown aside, whether properly or not, among the mass of German morality which is indeed purely wild, purely vague, and at times fantastical. These—these speculative writings were, for what reasons I could not imagine, Morella’s favourite and constant study, and that in process of time they became my own should be attributed to the simple but effectual influence of habit and example” (Poe, “Morella” 225-226). He did not even pretend to know *why* the books Morella read had been neglected in recent times.



“usually” considered the “dross” of German literature; above all, he cannot begin to “imagine” why she was so interested in reincarnation. The task of connecting the dots is always left to the reader—let the blame for thinking ill of such an incomparable woman fall on his or her head.

In the following paragraph, however, the narrator does mention some of the authors he was studying under Morella. Surprisingly, the names he mentions in no way corroborate his suggestion that she was studying witchcraft: “The wild Pantheism of Fichte; the modified Παλιγγενεσία of the Pythagoreans; and, above all, the doctrines of *Identity* as urged by Schelling, were generally the points of discussion presenting the most of beauty to the imaginative Morella” (Poe, “Morella” 230-31). He closes this enumeration with a paraphrase of the definition of identity given by Locke, an author less likely to be associated with the belief in metempsychosis is hard to conceive:

That identity which is termed personal, Mr. Locke, I think, truly defines to consist in the sameness of a rational being. And since by person we understand an intelligent essence having reason, and since there is a consciousness which always accompanies thinking, it is this which makes us all to be that which we call *ourselves*—thereby distinguishing us from other beings that think, and giving us our personal identity. But the *principium individuationis*, the notion of that identity *which at death is or is not lost forever*, was to me, at all times, a consideration of intense interest; not more from the perplexing and exciting nature of its consequences, than from the marked and agitated manner in which Morella mentioned them. (Poe, “Morella” 231 emphasis mine)

His paraphrase is, by and large, correct. But that is precisely the problem: it is too close to the letter; too much an evident paraphrase. Besides, the “I think” is embarrassingly ambiguous. What does the writer “think:” that the definition is Locke’s, or that it is true? We cannot be sure. Ridiculously tautological, the whole passage looks like the answer an insecure schoolboy might provide to a question posed by a teacher. The narrator seems to shy away from definite statements,

while buying himself some time by resorting to periphrasis. To my mind, this effectively conveys the impression that Morella may not have been studying evil after all; that this may be a misunderstanding prompted by the narrator's ignorance and resentment.<sup>147</sup>

These men's resentment, however, also expresses itself in other equally insidious ways. Most readers will probably also be under the impression that Ligeia's husband, though he had had his doubts, belatedly recognised, after her death and resurrection, that his wife was superior to him in every way, and at last became her most fervent and humble admirer. But that is not strictly true:

In the classical tongues she was deeply proficient, and as far as my own acquaintance extended in regard to the modern dialects of Europe, I have never known her at fault. Indeed, upon any theme of the most admired, because simply the most abstruse of the boasted erudition of the academy, have I *ever* found Ligeia at fault? How singularly—how thrillingly, this one point in the nature of my wife forced itself, at this late period only, upon my attention! I said her knowledge was such as I have never before known in woman—but where breathes the man who has traversed, and successfully, *all* the wide areas of moral, physical, and mathematical science?

(Poe, "Ligeia" 315)

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147 This supposition is strengthened, I think, by the misspelling of the name of Johann Gottlieb Fichte. In all editions of the tale except the early incomplete manuscript, Mabbott's text A, and the first edition of the tale, in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the name is misspelled "Fiche."

Thus, not only did Poe maintain his narrator's blunders, such as the lack of agreement between the name "meaning" and the pronoun "themselves," he added new ones in his revisions. The spelling "Fiche," indeed, can hardly be regarded as a typo, for Poe maintained it in all the editions of the tale he supervised, including that included in the November 1839 issue of the *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, in which Poe was employed at the time as "assistant editor." I believe the "mistake" is intentional, and the fact that the name was spelled correctly in the original version of the tale seems to confirm this. Mabbott thought Poe intended to display his own learning: "Poe here expresses one of his own strong interests" (*Tales* 1:237n4).

This is no rhetorical question. From what he had said before, the narrator can only be thinking of one “man:” himself. Not once, not even on the most “abstruse” of themes, has *he* ever found Ligeia “at fault.” From this statement flows the conclusion that he was qualified to examine her on all the many areas encompassed by her prodigious erudition—save the dread “metaphysical investigation” to which he makes it appear she had lured him. To hear him talk, one would think that he was Ligeia’s equal in all fields of *legitimate* human knowledge, and even more than her equal. This is an implicit inversion of the tableau of the domestic life of the couple which is found later in the tale: Ligeia with her hand on her husband’s shoulder, helping him to decipher some text he found impenetrable, and the very letters of which appeared unintelligible to him. Now, on the contrary, the husband places himself in the role of the teacher, evaluating her progress. He concluded, as we have seen, that her learning was remarkable *for a woman*.

This has all the air of being a revision of a situation the narrator found humiliating. He certainly did revise his appreciation of his wife’s character: “I saw not then what I now clearly perceive” (Poe, “Ligeia” 316). Now that he arrived at the conclusion that he was the only man that was qualified to evaluate her, he can afford to admire Ligeia; praising her, he praises himself. In view of this, his claim that the public admires only recondite lore becomes a comical instance of false modesty. If, in order to be admired by the culturally deprived public, one’s knowledge has to extend to the most neglected nooks and crannies of learning, then, by all means, let the public marvel at him.

In the revised version of the facts, then, Ligeia had become his teacher, not because she was more intelligent or well educated than he was, but because she was a witch. In other words, she cheated. The male intellectual pride that exudes from his text, makes it clear that he would consider it disgraceful to be his wife’s pupil. But Ligeia beat him only on “metaphysics,” which is his private by-word for witchcraft, therefore his male self-regard is safeguarded. The rewriting of the character of both Ligeia and Morella by their husbands, of course, is predicated on two false assumptions,

neither of which is borne out by the facts: the learning of the narrator, which is sadly all show, and the wonderful resurrection of the heroine, which is demonstrably an illusion resulting, precisely, from his superstition, and which his ignorance allows to develop into a firm belief. Meanwhile, he keeps telling us how much he misses his wife, and, by so doing, diverts our attention from the fact that he actually promotes *himself* at her expense; that, in other words, he makes her look bad, while boosting his own ego, correcting the past to flatter his vanity.

Like Godwin's *Memoirs*, the declared purpose of "Morella" and "Ligeia" is to help the reader form an estimation of the character of the extraordinary wife. She had been her husband's teacher; she had been a thinker. Yet, with the exception of the oracular death-bed pronouncements to which her husband's narrative itself is a tendentious commentary, her opinions are not reported. And this is no fortuitous circumstance, that can be put down to the ravages of time and faulty memory. It is strictly a matter of choice.

The narrator of "Morella," for example, decides that: "It is unnecessary to state the exact character of those disquisitions which, growing out of the volumes I have mentioned, formed for so long a time, almost the sole conversation of Morella and myself. By the learned in what might be termed theological morality they will be readily conceived, and, by the unlearned they would, at all events, be little understood" (Poe, "Morella" 230). As always, the narrator's praise is poisonous. Here, he implies that Morella was an unoriginal thinker whose commentaries were not worth recording. These were such as flowed naturally "out of the volumes" they were reading together—though, in all fairness, she appears to have been doing all the reading. In other words, she was merely an explicator of other people's thoughts who drew out the obvious unstated consequences of a text. Thus, he appeals to the stereotype of the schoolmistress, which embodied the received notions of the limitations of the female intellect.

Morella said nothing the "learned" would not "*readily* conceive;" the ignorant, on the other hand, could never understand what she was saying. Like Ligeia's husband, he appears to be praising

his wife, but is in fact boasting, appealing at the same time to his reader's vanity. The attitude underlying this statement is in fact the quintessence of pedantry. Which would the reader rather do? Be in the company of the cultivated few, or admit he is "unlearned" and cannot guess the "exact character" of Morella's "disquisitions?" Thus, the reader is brought insensibly into an identification with the narrator's apparent learning; in other words, the reader's pride of learning reinforces the pride of Poe's narrator.

Of course, his boast is belied by his blunders, through which he reveals he himself had no idea of her "meaning." For all he understood of these subjects, Locke's metaphysics and witchcraft might as well be the same thing—the narrator of "Ligeia," who thought of reading in terms of alchemy, was in a similar plight. Whenever the narrators of these tales praise their wives, however extravagantly, we may be sure some sting is mingled with their flattery. This is apparently another of Poe's originalities. I can only think of one other fiction written in the Gothic idiom prior to the publication of "Ligeia" in which a similar theme is handled in a similar way by a biased narrator: "Donnerhugel's Narrative" in Walter Scott's *Anne of Geierstein* (1829).

This novel is, like Poe's tales, named after a mysterious woman, or at least one that seemed so to the gullible and ingenuous male protagonist Arthur Philipson, *alias* De Vere, who, despite his best judgement, is filled with a superstitious dread of the title character, who he nonetheless ends up marrying, after assuring himself she was merely a woman.<sup>148</sup> One decisive factor in creating the illusion that Anne might not be exactly a woman was a narrative Arthur heard from the mouth of his rival for the love of Anne, Rudolph Donnerhugel. With a view to getting rid of the competition, Donnerhugel fabricates a fairy tale based on local rumours concerning Anne's ancestors, the barons of Arnheim. As Annette, Anne's servant, will later put it: "He is one of those prudent personages who depreciate and find fault with the goods he has thoughts of purchasing, in order to deter other offerers" (Scott, *Geierstein* 247). In it, Anne's maternal grandmother Hermione is portrayed as a

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148 Arthur and his father, John de Vere, Earl of Oxford, travel incognito as merchants, under the assumed name Philipson.

supernatural being, the daughter of a Persian magus by the name of Dannischmend, which, through certain unmistakable signs, Donnerhugel intimates had sold his soul to the devil.

Donnerhugel's purpose in telling this tale was precisely that of implanting on his suggestible rival's mind the conviction that Anne was descended from witches and unholy spirits, and that she could in fact be herself one or both.<sup>149</sup> Yet, the story-teller cunningly conceals his true purpose, and reacts with indignation when Arthur confronts him with the obvious tendency of his story:

“Bethink you, sir, that in all Christian lands, the imputation of sorcery is the most foul which can be thrown on Christian man or woman.”

“And I am so far from intimating such an imputation,” said Rudolph, “that, by the good sword I wear, he that dared give breath to such a thought against Anne of Geierstein, must undergo my challenge, and take my life, or lose his own. But the question is not whether the maiden herself practices sorcery, which he who avers had better get ready his tomb, and provide for his soul's safety; the doubt lies here, whether, as the descendant of a family whose relations with the unseen world are reported to have been of the closest degree, elfish and fantastical beings may not have power to imitate her form, and to present her appearance where she is not personally present—in fine, whether they have permission to play at her expense fantastical tricks, which they cannot exercise over other mortals, whose forefathers have ever regulated their lives by the rules of the church, and died in regular communion with it.” (Scott, *Geierstein* 109-10)

Donnerhugel's subterfuge had been inspired by the impression some extremely suggestive circumstances had made on Arthur. The latter believed—or half-believed—he had just seen Anne's phantom. Here Scott employs the narrative device which became associated with Anne Radcliffe's

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<sup>149</sup> Indeed, in the tenth chapter of book II, in which Anne explains all the mysteries that had so tormented Arthur, we find that it was rumored that Count Albert, Anne's father, “is a witch,” her grandmother “a will-of-wisp,” “Nymph of the Fire,” or “Salamander,” and that Anne herself partook “of the race of spirits of the elements” (Scott, *Geierstein* 244, 247).

name, the explained supernatural. Among many other surprising revelations, we later learn that the “apparition” that haunts both Arthur and the reader throughout good part of the novel had been staged. As it turns out, he had actually seen the real Anne, not her phantom, on her way to a secret rendezvous with her father. Her brothers, however, profited from the occasion to pull a practical joke on the ingenuous Arthur, and convinced her to play along with their scheme. It is to this false apparition—which he knew all along was not really an apparition—that Donnerhugel refers above.

Incidentally, this episode of the false apparition of Anne of Geierstein is involved in the genesis of Poe’s tales of woman. Indeed, Mabbott discovered that Poe alludes in “Berenice” to precisely this episode in Scott’s novel (see Mabbott, *Tales* 219n4). Like the Swiss heroine of Scott’s novel, Egæus’s cousin Berenice was remarkably agile and devoted to “the ramble on the hill-side” (Poe, “Berenice” 210).<sup>150</sup> Looking back to the time when she had been healthy, Egæus waxes mystical: “Ah! vividly is her image before me now, as in the early days of her light-heartedness and joy! Oh, gorgeous yet fantastic beauty! Oh, sylph amid the shrubberies of Arnheim! Oh, Naiad among its fountains! And then—then all is mystery and terror, and a tale which should not be told” (210). Anne of Geierstein was descended from the barons of Arnheim. She was also distinguished by her physical vigour, which Arthur, her future husband, found it difficult to accommodate to his rather narrow notions of femininity. Evidently, Poe is here alluding to her. More specifically, he clearly meant to allude, as Mabbott noticed, to the episode of her apparition to Arthur as he stood guard to the castle where they were lodged. This is indicated both by the tone and the context of the passage in Poe’s tale.

However, Mabbott did not see a relevant connection between Poe’s story and its source. Yet, the allusion is certainly significant. This is one of the many strategies employed by Poe to intimate that, like Arthur, his narrator labours under an illusion. Indeed, Arthur also felt that “what he gazed upon was immaterial and not of this world,” and could not shake the supernatural impression which

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150 Anne of Geierstein, who lived in the Swiss Alps, was a skilled mountaineer.

“subdue[d]” his “personal feelings towards Anne of Geierstein,—feelings, also, liable to be chilled by the mysterious uncertainty which the events of that evening had cast, like a thick mist, around the object of them” (Scott, *Geierstein* 89, 98). The subtitle of the novel, “The Lady of the Mist,” referred, of course, to the atmosphere of doubt that surrounded its title-character. This atmosphere is successfully reinforced by Donnerhugel’s narrative. Everything would fall into place by and by. Anne herself would later explain (in bk. 2, Ch. 10) all the mysteries that had so puzzled Arthur, including the truth about her nocturnal escapade. After he became satisfied that she was, indeed, only a woman, they were married and lived happily ever after.

I say this was Poe’s way of intimating his narrator was, like the protagonist of Scott’s novel, the victim of delusion—yet, their illusions are very different in nature. In a sense they are the exact opposite of each other. When he saw the real Anne pass him by, Arthur thought “his own imagination had raised up a phantom, painting to his outward senses the form and features which engrossed his mind” (Scott, *Geierstein* 89). Later, Donnerhugel helped him settle on a supernatural interpretation. But Arthur was wrong. What he saw was no phantom of the imagination. The woman that appeared to Egæus in his study, and who *was not* his cousin, on the contrary, could not have been anything but the kind of phantom Arthur initially thought had visited him.

Donnerhugel’s narrative has significant affinities not only with “Berenice,” but also with “Morella” and “Ligeia.” Although he denies it in the most vehement terms, Donnerhugel was deliberately denigrating the woman he intended to marry by suggesting she was a witch or an elemental spirit. His affinity with the narrators of those tales, who lets us conclude what they would never tell us—that their wives had performed wonders through witchcraft—is striking. This coincidence is all the more remarkable as Arthur’s belief in the apparition is strengthened by a reasoning that depends on his ideas of gender. Indeed, he found it easier to believe he had seen a ghost than that so decent a girl as Anne appeared to be should go out alone in the middle of the



night—in fact, he could not allow himself to even consider that possibility.<sup>151</sup> Arthur was therefore stuck between skepticism and superstition.

The credibility of Scott's treacherous narrator was bolstered by his seeming reluctance to convey an unfavourable impression of Anne, when that was precisely what he intended. Poe would later employ a similar strategy to cast a supernatural mist around "Morella" and "Ligeia." But, unlike Donnerhugel, who skilfully manipulates his ingenuous listener without being himself deceived, Poe's narrators seem to be manipulating themselves. One might say, therefore, that his unreliable narrators are a fusion of Donnerhugel and Arthur: they are disingenuous like the former, and credulous like the latter.

Poe's narrators, however, do not think of themselves as superstitious men. They have this in common with Arthur. But this is precisely what makes him helpless before a master storyteller like Donnerhugel, who begins by whetting the hero's curiosity with vague hints of the story of Anne's relatives, and feigning reluctance to say any more, until Arthur himself demands from him the story he had really meant to tell all along. "I can see nothing in your narrative," Arthur tells him,

and understand nothing from it, unless it be, that, because in Germany, as in other countries, there have been fools who have annexed the idea of witchcraft and sorcery to the possession of knowledge and wisdom, you are disposed to stigmatize a young maiden, who has always been respected and beloved by those around her, as a disciple of arts which, I trust, are as uncommon as unlawful. (Scott, *Geierstein* 133)

With this hesitating reply, Arthur signalled to the crafty storyteller, his rival, that he had swallowed the bait. In this passage, while on the one hand he explains away witchcraft as a superstition resulting from the prestige the learned and wise have in the eyes of the ignorant, on the

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<sup>151</sup> The omniscient third-person narrator lets us into the inner workings of Arthur's mind. His reluctance to admit any hypothesis that might sully the reputation of a lady predisposed him towards the supernatural: "He asked himself in vain, with what purpose that modest young maiden, whose manners were frank, but whose conduct had always seemed so delicate and reserved, could sally forth at midnight like a damsel-errant in romance, when she was in a strange country and suspicious neighbourhood; yet he rejected, as he would have shrunk from blasphemy, any interpretation which could have thrown censure upon Anne of Geierstein" (Scott, *Geierstein* 90).

other, he tacitly admits the existence of the very “unlawful arts” the possibility of which he half-heartedly denies. His is that dangerous “half-belief” of Poe’s narrators which is, in practice, already constitutes an irresistible inducement to admit supernatural intervention.<sup>152</sup>

The story of Hermione itself foreshadows important aspects of “Morella” and “Ligeia.” Its theme is the short and ill-fated marriage of two exceedingly learned individuals embodying the same idea that a man’s teacher and his lover must never be united in the same person that is implied in those tales. After his arrival at Arnheim, the Persian sage Dannischmend became the master of the Baron, Anne’s grandfather. For the duration of his stay, a year and a day, he instructed his pupil in the dark secrets of his unhallowed wisdom. After his departure, he was replaced by his daughter, the ravishing and ultra-learned Hermione, who was charged with completing the baron’s education in the arcane subjects he had been studying under her father. However, the Persian sage warned his pupil: “if you value the permanence of your family, look not upon her as aught else than a helpmate in your studies; for if you forget the instructress in the beauty of the maiden, you will be buried with your sword and your shield, as the last male of your house. (...) Be kind to her, but not over kind” (Scott, *Geierstein* 140). These last words resonate ominously with Poe’s tales, whose heroes were most certainly not “over kind” towards their wives.

I feel fairly certain that part of the inspiration for Poe’s learned women Morella and Ligeia—especially her—came from Donnerhugel’s portrait of Hermione. Like them, she is incredibly learned, especially in obscure subjects, and imparted lessons on those subjects to the baron—who would also become her husband: “their pursuits were of a most extraordinary nature” (Scott, *Geierstein* 117). She is also fluent in many tongues. Indeed, she is examined by the Bishop of Bamberg, who is as impressed with her as Ligeia’s husband was impressed with his wife: “When asked regarding her knowledge of languages and science, he answered, that he had been attracted to

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152 When she explains him the origin of the superstitions involving her family, Anne of Geierstein shows she perfectly understood Arthur’s perplexity: “let us not neglect the opportunity to disabuse our English friend, of the absurd reports he has listened to with doubt and wonder, perhaps, but not with absolute incredulity” (Scott, *Geierstein* 247).

Arnheim by the most extravagant reports on these points, but that he must return confessing ‘the half thereof had not been told unto him’” (117).

Her walk too, like Ligeia’s, was preternaturally light.<sup>153</sup> When she first miraculously appeared in the baron’s locked study, Hermione alighted from a pedestal, “and descended on the floor as light and as safe as if she had been formed of gossamer;” as a dancer, “her performances seemed those of an aerial being” (Scott, *Geierstein* 117). In *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* [1933], Mary Bonaparte has famously argued that Poe had unconsciously formed Ligeia in the image of his mother: “Thus (...) the graceful dancer is evoked, the slender consumptive that was Elizabeth Arnold” (224). The parallel with *Anne of Geierstein*, however, suggests that Poe was deliberately evoking another graceful dancer, Hermione, whom the Bishop of Bamberg styles “a Doctor of Theology in the dress of an Eastern dancing-girl” (Scott, *Geierstein* 117). While this does not necessarily rule out Bonaparte’s claim that Poe’s work expresses an unconscious yearning after the dead mother, in light of the strong evidence of *conscious* elaboration, Bonaparte’s statement should be, at the very least, somewhat qualified.

According to her husband, Ligeia “came and departed as a shadow” (Poe, “Ligeia” 311). The same thing could be said, with even more propriety, of Hermione. Upon opening his locked study in the morning after her father had left him, the Baron found her standing on a pedestal where a “silver lamp of the most beautiful proportions” had been; later, she vanished from her room in an equally mysterious fashion, leaving no trace of her presence but “a handful of light grey ashes, like those produced by burning fine paper (...) on the bed where she had been laid” (Scott, *Geierstein* 121-22).

The story of Hermione may also have inspired one of the most intriguing holes in Ligeia’s story. Her husband claims he had “*never known* the paternal name of her who was my friend and my betrothed, and who became a partner of my studies, and finally the wife of my bosom” (Poe,

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153 Her husband speaks, in a passage I have looked at in the second chapter, of “the incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall” (Poe, “Ligeia” 311).

“Ligeia” 311). The origin of the exotic woman who first shared the Baron of Arnheim’s studies and then his bed being equally obscure, “the beautiful Persian was generally called” simply Hermione (Scott, *Geierstein* 117). In both cases, this circumstance strengthens the atmosphere of doubt on which superstition thrives.

Indeed, Scott’s handling of the subject presupposes a hypothesis regarding the origin of such superstitions that is hinted by Arthur, who like his counterpart in “Ligeia” could not *all* believe it, and is later confirmed by Anne herself. Hermione, she tells Arthur:

availed herself of her foreign dress and manners, as well as of a beauty, which was said to have been marvellous, and an agility seldom equalled, to impose upon and terrify the ignorant German ladies, who, hearing her speak Persian and Arabic, were already disposed to consider her as over closely connected with unlawful arts. She was of a fanciful and imaginative disposition, and delighted to place herself in such colours and circumstances as might confirm their most ridiculous suspicions.

(Scott, *Geierstein* 248)

Thus, Ligeia shared with Hermione the very qualities that had apparently given rise to the popular superstition. Indeed, according to her husband, she too possessed remarkable agility, uncommon beauty, and knew many different languages. And, as Arthur had himself previously remarked, science and wisdom themselves were confused by the ignorant with magic and witchcraft. Of course, Ligeia’s husband also associates these things with the supernatural—he too came to believe that she was connected with the “unlawful arts,” or, as he so slyly puts it, that she sought “a wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden” (Poe, “Ligeia” 316). This can easily be explained according to Scott’s hypothesis. For the narrator reveals himself, on the one hand, as ignorant and superstitious as those “German ladies” mentioned in the novel, who thought languages they themselves did not understand were demoniacal, and, on the other, as suggestible as Arthur.

Thus, “Donnerhugel’s Narrative” and “Ligeia” are both false stories, in the same sense in which the supernatural plots in the novels of Ann Radcliffe are false. Anne of Geierstein herself, when she explains the mysteries to her future husband, makes the relevant distinction between “the real truth of my family history” and “the romantic legend” he had heard from Donnerhugel (Scott, *Geierstein* 249). Particularly interesting to our purposes is Hermione’s death. According to Anne, she had eventually fallen a prey to the resentment she had excited in the aforementioned “German ladies:” “It was believed that she died of poison” (250) The circumstances surrounding her death, however, had been, she says, “confused in popular tradition, and the real facts turned into a fairy tale,” which Donnerhugel adapted to his purposes (250). This, of course, is very nearly what happens in “Ligeia,” where, however, the reader must guess the true story. Incidentally, the idea that the solution to such mysteries might be superfluous for an inquiring reader is intimated by Anne herself who, when Arthur asks her for the solution to the mystery of her “apparition,” replies: “Is it possible (...) that a man of sense, and an Englishman, cannot guess at the explanation which I have to give, though not, perhaps, very distinctly?” (248-49).

Thus, the truth about Hermione is that she had stood out from the women in her surroundings by her learning. She did not behave like a woman was expected to, and payed with her life for her unorthodoxy. Scott’s portrayal of her constitutes, therefore, an explicit challenge to the conventional representation of the intellectual status of women. Lewis’s Matilda adds to an intellectual “male” stance a sexually transgressive behaviour. Such depictions of deviant femaleness, which were totally incompatible with the prevailing sentimental ideology, were entirely absent from the femicide stories of Macnish and Dickens. Hermione and Matilda—especially her—are gender-benders. And these characters clearly foreshadow Poe’s Morella and Ligeia. Indeed, in the tales named after these two characters, Poe combined the subversive strategies Scott and Lewis had deployed in their Gothic novels to heighten the culturally disruptive effect of the femicide story. *Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide* and “Madman’s Manuscript” were relatively unambitious

hoaxes, which appeared to have been designed to expose the abuses of male authority. Poe's "Morella" and "Ligeia," on the other hand, like *Anne of Geierstein*, and especially *The Monk*, indirectly bring into question patriarchal values themselves.

Still, despite the fact that Matilda and Hermione foreshadow Morella and Ligeia, there is still something that particularly distinguishes Poe's heroines. Hermione's tale, which so impressed Arthur, is not told by the lady's husband—the Baron appears neither to have borne any ill-will towards her on account of her learning nor suspected her of witchcraft. Ambrosio is also not the narrator of his own tale. That combination—the tale of a learned woman as told by a husband who, as if he did not mean to, conveys the impression that she was a witch—, I insist, Poe appears not to have found in any of the Gothic novels or magazine short stories that inspired "Morella" and "Ligeia." Some fictional narrative containing a similar idea, and which Poe may have read, may yet surface; that is a possibility that can never be categorically ruled out. Yet, even if this hypothetical source were to be found, this would not make the fact of there being a widely-known—at least in Poe's time—non-fictional precedent for all this any less significant.

## 2 – “Communication of Spirits:” Godwin’s rewriting of Wollstonecraft

The narrators of Poe’s tales about learned women say what they really felt about Morella and Ligeia as if they had not meant to say it. They evidently felt their wives were unduly “masculine,” and that there was something unnatural about the way they had become their husband’s teachers. In hindsight, however, they found a way to account for these things so as to get rid of their feelings of inferiority. These men come to suspect their wives had been witches. Because they say things they really did not mean to say, however, they discredit themselves as well as their revision of their wives’ characters. They show, that is, that the wives had not been witches; that they had only appeared so to their ignorant husbands, who feeling emasculated by their superiority, had vindicated themselves and their offended sense of manhood through slippery rationalisations.

As I was saying, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* provides a relevant precedent for all this. Indeed, in that book, Godwin reveals himself a perfect representative of the prejudice against women of intellect and learning that his wife’s friend Mary Hays had denounced. More precisely, he betrays the same kind of prejudice through the same kind of sentimental rhetorical mechanisms and seemingly unaccountable lapses for which Poe’s narrators are remarkable. I do not believe this is a coincidence. The Gothic, and all the fictions of male tyranny that it spawned, form the context of “Ligeia” and “Morella,” but I regard *Memoirs*, which shares these important and highly unusual traits with them, as their pretext. I believe, that is, that Poe deliberately created two parodies of Godwin’s narrative of his marriage with Wollstonecraft.

I use the word pretext to avoid misunderstanding. Although I believe Poe intended his tales as parodies of *Memoirs*, I think his purposes for doing this went well beyond personal attack. Therefore, I say that Godwin was not so much the target of his satire but its pretext. That is, Poe used him because he thought Godwin represented an extreme version of a sort of prejudice that was

common to most literary men of his age, and to which Poe had alluded in his review of Barrett Browning's *A Drama of Exile*.

At this point I should mention that the influence of Godwin's novels on Poe's fiction was already clear to his contemporaries. Indeed, Pollin reiterates an old critical conviction when he writes that "the themes and atmosphere of Poe's tales often resemble those of William Godwin's 'nightmare' novels," and that the influence of these on Poe's work may have been direct, or indirect, since he "was deeply conscious of the peculiar genius of Charles Brockden Brown, whose inspiration in turn was self-ascribed to Godwin" (*Discoveries* 107-108). Yet, Pollin's chapter remains the only systematic survey of the allusions to Godwin in Poe's work, seventeen in all. This critic remarks that: "Many of these are not casual references, but rather the keystones of his criticism, or they are thematic germs out of which he develops an entire narrative rationale" (109). Although Poe was to a certain extent certainly indebted to Godwin, whom he regarded as a better designer of plot than Dickens, whom he deems "totally deficient in constructiveness," it appears to me that Pollin overstates the American author's devotion for the author of *Caleb Williams*. "Godwin as a standard of excellence," he writes, "was (...) firmly implanted in Poe's mind" in 1841, and by 1844 this conviction had developed into an "entrenched Godwinolatry" (114, 119).

It appears to me that the evidence on which Pollin bases such assumptions is both too scanty and too ambiguous. Pollin's interpretation of Poe's writing on Godwin, indeed, appears to me to be informed by the very preconceptions that his work in exposing Poe's handling of sources helped to displace. "Godwin, too" he writes, "was a visionary, although he believed in a different type of dream from those which haunted Poe" (*Discoveries* 109). For reasons I have explained in the preceding chapter, I think this statement may be only half correct. Poe no doubt thought that Godwin was a "visionary," but appears rather to have thought of himself as, and indeed prided himself on being, a reasoner. In any event, Pollin's article deals exclusively with Poe's overt allusions to Godwin, when it seems to me that in this as in most other cases his "buried allusions"



are much more revealing. But the allusions of which I am speaking, and which I think are unquestionably recognizable in Poe's work are not to the novelist, with which Pollin was particularly concerned, but to the man and the philosopher. Indeed, Pollin was specifically interested in studying the influence of Godwin's fiction on Poe's, which is unquestionably very significant. But the plots of "Morella" and "Ligeia" clearly evoke the very peculiar circumstances of Godwin's relationship with Wollstonecraft. In fact, the opinions expressed by the narrators of those tales bear a distinct resemblance with the opinions Godwin himself had endorsed throughout his life.

In those tales, when the learned wife dies and her husband becomes the chronicler of their life together, the conflict between the two, which the husband glosses over with his praise for her, becomes a dirty battle of words. The original conflict has different overtones in each tale. In an ingenuous reading, Morella's husband had no interest in sex and, in fact, gives us to understand his marriage had been a mere formality, meant to secure for him the company of a friend; his wife, on the other hand, apparently cursed him for his asceticism. An equally unsophisticated reading of "Ligeia" would run as follows. Although she had never displayed proper "womanly abandonment" to her husband, Ligeia secretly idolised him. Her devotion was such, indeed, that she defied the sacred laws of life and death, risking her soul for his sake. Therefore, she was not less feminine than others, as her intellectual achievements and independence appear to have suggested to her husband, but the most feminine of women. Her love was, he later decides, "more than womanly" (Poe, "Ligeia" 317).

However, the husband's attempt to tell the story in his own terms—the terms of the victor—is not successful. This is due in part to incompetent writing. The narrator says more than he intends, intimating both the plausible solutions to the mystery and, through vicious innuendo, his grudge for the wife he praises in so extravagantly hyperbolic terms. Another reason for his failure is the

tension between the wife's statements and his construal of her character. She just does not seem to be the woman he tells us she was.

Godwin revises Wollstonecraft's character in similar ways. In fact, the tension between the declared intentions and the effects of his narrative about her is as evident in *Memoirs* as it is in Poe's tales. His portrayal of Wollstonecraft, in fact, fails to conform to both his and her ideas of female virtue—which, contrary to what is often asserted, were not identical. When he first met her, at least, he thought she had not been all that a woman should be. She lacked, in particular, a proper appreciation of *men*, he thought. He tells us she later changed, and assumed all the conventional charms of “sensibility,” yet, at the same time, he implies she was, even then, still not “feminine” enough. And then, his statement of her opinions is completely incompatible with *A Vindication*, which, of course, can only mean one of two things—either she had not lived up to her ideals, or she had recanted those ideals to at least try to become what *he thought* a woman should be. He thought the second was true. Godwin's title is therefore highly misleading. He certainly did not vindicate the ambitious book mentioned in the title of his—he destroyed it and its author along with it, and not only by exposing her private life. He destroyed all Wollstonecraft represented, and all she ever had struggled for, by the same devious means that Poe's femicide husbands had used to try to settle the score with their wives.

We find in Godwin's narrative, indeed, the same perplexing contrast between expressions of the most fervent admiration for the dead wife and the most terrible insinuations concerning not only her morals, but also her achievements and abilities. Wollstonecraft was “the object dearest to my heart that the universe contained,” he says, and again “all that was dear to me in the universe” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 114, 116). Godwin's regret is, indeed, as intense as that of the narrator of “Ligeia,” but unfortunately, the resemblance does not stop there. For the narrator of “Ligeia” the death of his wife represented the disappointment of *his* “well-grounded expectations” (“Ligeia” 316). He mourned, in other words, for the loss of the gains he anticipated from his intercourse with

her. And so did Godwin. The following comes from the first edition of *Memoirs*: “The improvement I had reason to promise myself, was however yet in its commencement, when a fatal event, hostile to the moral interests of mankind, ravished from me the light of my steps, and left me nothing but the consciousness of what I had possessed, and must now possess no more!” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 217n). His improvement is thus presented as the only reliable measure of her worth.

Since she had been cut down before she could realise all her potential, mankind did not know what they had lost; but Godwin did, and therefore he felt it was his duty to write a book clarifying his wife’s legacy, so that the whole world might be improved. This is, at least, the declared purpose of his book, which is reiterated in its very last sentence, in which the author manifests his confidence in having done what he set out to do: “While I have described the improvement I was in the act of receiving, I believe I have put down the leading traits of her intellectual character” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 122). This is, more or less, the same plan that Poe’s narrators follow. Indeed, like them, Godwin decides to make the intellectual portrait of his wife indirectly, by describing the effect she had on him, his “improvement,” instead of attempting to outline her thought and its development.

Accordingly, most of the direct speech attributed to Wollstonecraft in *Memoirs* consists either of excerpts of her private correspondence, chiefly with her first partner Gilbert Imlay, the father of her eldest child Fanny, or paraphrases of her conversation with Godwin himself. But even these quotations are few and far between. When her voice is heard, it is usually—I would say without exception—to utter some emotionally charged, pathetic statement directly connected with some especially affecting circumstance of her private and sentimental life, which has usually something to do with death. Thus, it is Godwin’s policy to let Wollstonecraft be heard only when at her most vulnerable.

While he claims that his purpose was indirectly to describe the “intellectual character” of his wife, Godwin effectively subjects the thinker and the writer to the sentimental heroine—for it is as

such that Wollstonecraft is presented in his book. By so doing, he also makes her a function of his own “intellectual character.” For, according to his rhetoric, the proper way for the public to form a faithful picture of Wollstonecraft is not, as might be supposed, reading her works, but listening to Godwin explain how she had “improved”—or rather, was on the process of improving—him, by means he represents, most emphatically, as *non*-intellectual. He casts her in the typical sentimental role of the woman who, by her sensibility and, above all, through her self-sacrificing love, reconnects the philosopher, who was lost in a world of metaphysical speculation and high idealism, with human affections and emotions that had projected in Bulwer-Lytton’s *Eugene Aram* in the figure of Madeleine.

Indeed, if *Memoirs* were all we had to go on, Mary Wollstonecraft’s thought would be as mysterious to us as Ligeia’s or Morella’s. In all, Godwin makes only two direct quotations from the writing she had or intended to publish throughout the entire book. Most significantly, his portrait of the author of *A Vindication* does not contain a single line from that book, of which Godwin offers only two or three very brief and loose paraphrases, and to which he alludes, without exception, in the most dismissive terms.

He regarded it as an immature production of the first epoch of Wollstonecraft’s career, in which her supposed shortcomings as an author, to which Godwin continually alludes, were particularly noticeable. He had “been displeased, as literary men are apt to be, with a few offences, against grammar and other minute points of composition” when he first read *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). This was Wollstonecraft’s reply to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Godwin was equally unimpressed with the writing on *Rights of Woman*. In fact, he implies that she was only really becoming a full-fledged writer when she came to her unexpected end, but never quite got there, remarking of the novel she left unfinished, *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*, that: “She was sensible how arduous a task it is to produce a truly excellent novel; and she roused her faculties to grapple with it. All her other works were produced with a

rapidity, that did not give her powers time fully to expand. But this was written slowly and with mature consideration,” which, Godwin implies had never been the case in the past (*Memoirs* 111). He therefore makes excuses in his wife’s name for the poor quality of the writing in all of her books save the one she left unfinished—thus effectively representing her as a failed writer.

But Godwin’s greatest objection to *A Vindication*, and indeed to all Wollstonecraft’s polemical, strictly philosophical works, had nothing to do with grammar, but with alleged offenses against gender propriety. According to him, the book was too “masculine,” and therefore entirely out of character for his wife, who was eminently “feminine.” Thus, he effectively presents the book as a female encroachment on the male provinces of philosophy and politics, subjects which he suggests Wollstonecraft was constitutionally unfit to discuss *because* she was a woman. “The strength of her mind,” says Godwin,

lay in intuition. She was often right, by this means only, in matters of mere speculation. Her religion, her philosophy (in both of which the errors were comparatively few, and the strain dignified and generous) were, as I have already said, the pure result of feeling and taste. She adopted one opinion, and rejected another, spontaneously, by a sort of tact, and the force of a cultivated imagination. (*Memoirs* 121)

This comes from the impassioned eulogium of his subject with which he concludes his *Memoirs*. It is Godwin’s final word on the subject. Wollstonecraft, being *all* woman—as her husband assures us she was—was naturally *all* intuition. Godwin continues, with what appears to be an unswerving adherence to truth, as one who discharges an unpleasant duty: “yet, though perhaps, in the strict sense of the term, she reasoned little, it is surprising what a degree of soundness is to be found in her determinations” (*Memoirs* 121).

This terribly condescending passage illustrates the full meaning of the word “patronising”—it puts me in mind of the passage where the narrator of “Ligeia” praises his wife for never letting

him catch her in error. Considering how little Wollstonecraft did think, Godwin would expect her to be wrong much more frequently on matters that absolutely required thinking. But she surprised him. She did get things right on occasion, but for Godwin this does not prove that she was capable of sustained, logical reasoning. No matter how one looks at it, this is a terrible thing to say about a woman who prided herself on her rationality, and who tried to prove, and in fact did prove, that women were intelligent beings at a time when many granted them only the sort of second-rate intuitive cunning Godwin here attributes to her. That is precisely the point Wollstonecraft made in *A Vindication*: the ideology of sensibility, insofar as it postulated the existence of a feminine alternative to reason *properly so called*, was an instrument of oppression. In fact, Godwin's claim that "she reasoned little" is perfectly in keeping with the opinions of Rousseau, which she had explicitly rejected. He too, granted women *some* intellectual capacity: "L'art de penser n'est pas étranger aux femmes, mais ne doivent faire que'effleurer les sciences de raisonnement" (*Émile* 542).

Thus, Godwin's portrait of Wollstonecraft as an exquisitely sensitive, but not very rational woman is in explicit contradiction with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, where she had remarked: "Only 'absolute in loveliness,' the portion of rationality granted to woman, is, indeed, very scanty; for denying her genius and judgment, it is scarcely possible to divine what remains to characterize intellect" (121). As regards sensibility, she thought it was no substitute for reason: "I discern not a trace of the image of God in either sensation or matter. Refined seventy times seventy, they are still material; intellect dwells not there; nor will fire ever make lead gold;" Wollstonecraft went on to assert flatly that "sensibility is not reason" (133).

Never one for mincing words, Wollstonecraft further argues that the conventional system of female education was not only cruel and inhumane, but also absurd and inadequate to the very end for which it was designed. If the idea was to ensure that women were faithful to their husbands, it made no sense to teach them to rely exclusively on

the fallacious light of sentiment; too often used as a softer phrase for sensuality. It follows, then, I think, that from their infancy women should either be shut up like eastern princes, or educated in such a manner as to be able to think and act for themselves.

Why do men halt between two opinions, and expect impossibilities? Why do they expect virtue from a slave, from a being whom the constitution of society has rendered weak, if not vicious? (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 115-16)

I think this passage is enough to show how misleading Godwin's unenthusiastic appraisal of Wollstonecraft's powers as a writer is. Here, every word counts. She *thinks* that all women should be taught to think. A *Vindication* is in fact arguably organised around a central performative statement: women are capable of reason. By asserting herself as a thinking woman and philosopher, she proves the assertion. This in turn ties in with the religious side of her argument. Her ideas of sexual equality "may be termed," she wrote, "Utopian dreams," but the fact that she could dream them proved they were both feasible and just: "Thanks to that being who impressed them on my soul, and gave me sufficient strength of mind to dare to exert my own reason, till, becoming dependent only on him for the support of my virtue, I view, with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex" (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 105). A rational being submits only to reason. By asserting her own rationality, then, Wollstonecraft proves that women are rational beings, and therefore must not be subjected to man, a being as imperfect as herself.

Yet, disregarding all her subtle and cogent argumentation, Godwin the philosopher says that, strictly speaking, Wollstonecraft did very little thinking. And he was not finished with her—not by a long shot:

if this quality [to intuitively reach sound judgements] was of use to her in topics that seem the proper province of reasoning, it was much more so in matters directly appealing to the intellectual taste. In a robust and unwavering judgement of this sort,

there is a kind of witchcraft; when it decides justly, it produces a responsive vibration in every ingenuous mind. (...) When a true opinion emanated in this way from another mind, the conviction produced in my own assumed a similar character, instantaneous and firm. (Godwin, *Memoirs* 122-123)

Thus, Wollstonecraft was able to submit “ingenuous” minds to her points of view through other means than rational argument—for, having hit on the truth intuitively, she could not be expected to *explain* her points of view—; by a sort of “witchcraft,” which was allegedly her forte, that appealed not to the intellect but to the emotions. Incidentally, Godwin had before remarked that *A Vindication* had impressed only “ingenuous minds,” thus effectively suggesting, as Ayres has pointed out, that her “argument is not sophisticated enough for more educated and logical minds” (*Betwixt* 29). What this means is that Wollstonecraft was really out of her element in philosophical enquiry, or the “proper province of reasoning,” as Godwin calls it. He implies, of course, that what her book lacked in sophistication of argument, it made up by the charming innocence of sentiment the author displayed. The author of *A Vindication*, for whom innocence was simply a pretty name for ignorance, just as sensibility was a pretty name for irrationality, would certainly not have been flattered by such a statement.<sup>154</sup> Yet, at the same time, Godwin tells us that Wollstonecraft exerted a certain fascination, a glamour, one might say, that made even the philosophical Godwin adhere fully and automatically to her opinions, without mature deliberation, and this conveys an ominous sense of menace which makes his eulogium suspect. Perhaps his judgement had been swayed by Wollstonecraft’s charms. This is an idea which hovers over his text, without ever being fully realised, as if this was something of which the writer himself had not been conscious. This is the same very peculiar feeling we get from Poe’s tales.

Wollstonecraft had “a minute attention to first impressions, and a just appreciation of them” Godwin writes (*Memoirs* 122). Thus, he contrasts her way of thinking—or was it thinking? —with

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<sup>154</sup> “innocence, as ignorance is courteously termed” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 113).



philosophy. For philosophical thinking may perhaps best be described, and in fact often has been described, as an attitude of permanent distrust of first impressions. Earlier in his short concluding essay on the excellences of his wife, he had already made it very clear that philosophy was his department:

We had cultivated our powers (if I may venture to use this sort of language) in different directions; I chiefly an attempt at logical and metaphysical distinction, she a taste for the picturesque. One of the leading passions of my mind has been an anxious desire not to be deceived. That has led me to view the topics of my reflection on all sides; and to examine and reexamine without end, the questions that interest me.

(...) I have been stimulated, as long as I can remember, by an ambition for intellectual distinction; but, as long as I can remember, I have been discouraged, when I have endeavoured to cast the sum of my intellectual value, by finding that I did not possess, in the degree of some other men, an intuitive perception of intellectual beauty. (Godwin, *Memoirs* 121)

This is a crucial passage in Clemit and Walker's reading of *Memoirs*. They produce the last sentence in this passage as evidence of Godwin's thorough identification with Wollstonecraft's ideas: "despite the vicissitudes of her own life, she struggled to keep hold of the unique combination of introspection, observation, and intense response which comprised the self that Godwin valorized, as he later memorialized her 'intuitive perception of intellectual beauty,' echoing Wollstonecraft's phrase in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" (Clemit and Walker, Introduction 28).

It appears to me that this statement equally misrepresents the two texts under analysis. Godwin may himself have intended to allude to Wollstonecraft's text; I think this is very likely. Wollstonecraft does, indeed, use the phrase "intellectual beauty" in *A Vindication*. She employed it, however, in a completely different sense. "I know," she wrote,

that it will require a considerable length of time to eradicate the firmly rooted prejudices which sensualists have planted; (...) and to convince the world that the poisoned source of female vices and follies, if it be necessary, in compliance with custom, to use synonymous terms in a lax sense, has been the sensual homage paid to beauty:—to beauty of features; for it has been shrewdly observed by a German writer, that a pretty woman, as an object of desire, is generally allowed to be so by men of all descriptions; whilst a fine woman, who inspires more sublime emotions by displaying intellectual beauty, may be overlooked or observed with indifference, by those men who find their happiness in the gratification of their appetites.

(Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 116 emphasis mine).

Wollstonecraft means, of course, those “polite men who do not wish to be encumbered by mind” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 172).

In Wollstonecraft’s writing, then, the phrase “intellectual beauty” has reference to the charms of a cultivated mind. Men, however, were accustomed to see only women’s bodies, and therefore had put in place a system of education that thwarted their intellectual development; that conditioned women to care for their physical appearance, to the detriment of their intellectual faculties. Thus, in effect, Wollstonecraft is here contesting the same conventions that made most men of her time, which she thought were themselves educated according to false principles, perceive women like her and Catharine Macaulay as “viragos.” Godwin, fittingly enough, applies the phrase he probably found in *A Vindication* to the sublime which had originally reference to the woman who could appreciate it—indeed, the phrase does not appear in any other sense in any of Wollstonecraft’s works—, and thus distorts, as usual, Wollstonecraft’s ideas. Clemit and Walker in turn become accomplices to Godwin’s biased and interested rewriting of Wollstonecraft.

On the other hand, in the passage of *Memoirs* in which he employs the phrase, Godwin is actually contrasting “intuitive perception” with “logical and metaphysical distinction” and his own

“anxious desire not to be deceived,” hence, with what he regarded as reason. This, of course, was precisely what Wollstonecraft meant by “mind”—for she too was a rationalist. Women, she thought, were being denied, both in theory and in the practice that presupposed it, the only faculty that deserved to be so termed: reason. And this is precisely what Godwin is here denying her.

Thus, the ideologically charged contrast between his representations of himself and of Wollstonecraft is eloquent. His specialty was thinking; Wollstonecraft’s was feeling. He regrets to say, therefore, that he has “seldom been right” in judgements of taste “but by dint of persevering examination, and the change and correction of my first opinions” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 121). He had no *feeling* for such things, of course. His wife, on the other hand, was peculiarly endowed to receive aesthetic impressions, for she was, he thinks, very *sensitive*. He also implies, of course, as he does throughout the whole book, that Wollstonecraft did not scrutinise her first impressions as carefully as he did, and also that her judgement on such matters did not involve rational thought. I doubt Wollstonecraft could ever have agreed. In any case, the trait of mind that supposedly made her such a good judge of what Godwin terms “intellectual beauty” was certainly not what he (or Wollstonecraft for that matter) would call reason or intellect. Indeed, the tendency to cling to first impressions that, says Godwin, served her so well in matters of “imagination,” evidently rendered her opinions on all other matters—on all serious matters that were the “proper province of reasoning”—suspect.

Thus, Godwin’s praise is actually a back-handed compliment, and a betrayal to Wollstonecraft’s thought. Godwin takes much more than he gives. Instead of reason, he grants Wollstonecraft precisely that which she regarded as a consolation prize meant to appease subjected women: sensibility. Of course, he is only being gallant. He does not really regret his habit of carefully examining all sides of a question and studiously correcting first impressions, or the “desire not to be deceived.” This is what is called thinking, in the proper sense of the word—in any event, that is certainly what *Godwin* would call thinking. He was certainly not about to quit being a

philosopher. The “improvement” he was getting from Wollstonecraft, then, would be that he learned to live a little, and occasionally to suspend the exercise of reason. On her part, he implies, she scarcely ever thought.

It is all very well for Godwin to admit his inferiority towards his wife in matters of taste when his very admission of weakness is, in effect, a declaration of his infinite intellectual superiority as well as a validation of male intellectual pride. Furthermore, Godwin’s disparagement of Wollstonecraft’s reasoning is firmly and evidently rooted on his conception of gender—or more precisely sex. Indeed, he was of the opinion that the female mind was fundamentally different from the male mind; Wollstonecraft violently disagreed. Yet, this radical disagreement becomes completely obscured, as Brenda Ayres has remarked, in most modern criticism of his book.

By “logical and metaphysical distinction” Godwin evidently means that abstract thought on which rationalists thought all truly philosophical inquiry was rooted. Abstract thought, of course, was then regarded by most as paradigmatically male. An extreme version of this position appears in *Émile*. Wollstonecraft, who of course rejected such notions, called this “one of Rousseau’s chimeras,” and presented a translation of relevant passage in a footnote:

Researches into abstract and speculative truths, the principles and axioms of sciences, in short, every thing which tends to generalize our ideas, is not the proper province of women; their studies should be relative to points of practice; it belongs to them to apply those principles which men have discovered; and it is their part to make observations, which direct men to the establishment of general principles. (*Vindication* 108n).<sup>155</sup>

The conception of gender that underlies Godwin’s *Memoirs* is much closer to Rousseau’s than it is to Wollstonecraft’s position in *A Vindication*—indeed, though it might not seem so at first

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155 Here is the original passage: “La recherche des vérités abstraites et spéculatives, des principes, des axiomes dans les sciences, tout ce qui tend à généraliser les idées n’est point du ressort des femmes, leurs études doivent se rapporter toutes à la pratique; c’est à elles à faire l’application des principes que l’homme a trouvés, et c’est à elles de faire les observations qui mènent l’homme à l’établissement des principes” (Rousseau, *Émile* 488).

glance, it is practically identical to Rousseau's. In the first edition of *Memoirs* there was a passage that intimated this only too clearly. The passage in question, however, was omitted from the revised second edition. Even Godwin must have realised that it contradicted too flatly Wollstonecraft's statements on the same subject:

A circumstance by which the two sexes are particularly distinguished from each other, is, that the one is accustomed more to the exercise of its reasoning powers, and the other of its feelings. Women have a frame of body more delicate and susceptible of impression than men, and, in proportion as they receive a less intellectual education, are more unreservedly under the empire of feeling. Feeling is liable to become a source of erroneous decisions, because a mind not accustomed to logical analysis, cannot be expected accurately to discriminate between the simple dictates of an ingenuous mind, and the factitious sentiments of a partial education. Habits of deduction enable us to correct this defect. But habits of deduction may generate habits of sophistry; and scepticism and discussion, while they undermine our prejudices, have sometimes a tendency to weaken or distort our feelings. Hence we may infer one of the advantages accruing from the association of persons of an opposite sex: they may be expected to counteract the principal mistake into which either is in danger to fall. (*Memoirs* 216)

Here, Godwin ambiguously appeals at the same time to both the traditional view that women are naturally "sensitive," as opposed to rational, and to Wollstonecraft's idea that the distinction was not natural, but a result of an arbitrary system of education that did not develop their understanding. But one simply cannot have it both ways.

The identification of understanding and sensibility respectively with the male and female principles, only implied in the latter version, was explicit here. Although his appears to be a mitigated version of Rousseau's theory, the mitigation is only apparent, insofar as Godwin implies

that the distinction is, in part at least, natural. In practice, therefore, he completely validates the conventional patriarchal view that man and woman complement each other intellectually.

Moreover, the subaltern role of the female mind relative to the male is as crucial to Godwin's way of thinking as it was to Rousseau's. The "mistakes" into which single women are described as being in danger of falling are evidently much more disabling than those into which men who live without forming an association with an individual of the "opposite" sex are supposed to be exposed to. The female intuition of which Godwin is speaking is being explicitly equated with emotion. Judgements founded on such intuition, according to his terms, are valueless unless validated by "male" logical thinking. Therefore, in practice, he indirectly reiterates the view that a woman needs a man's reason to guide her and preserve her from the errors into which her sex is depicted as being constitutionally prone to fall into; that she is doomed eternally to pursue the reason that she can never attain but must be content to admire in man. This supposed handicap could never be compensated, not even by the intercourse with rational beings, that is, men, who, on the other hand, could get along very well, though perhaps less agreeably, without women.

Godwin makes allowances for individual variations—this is what makes his statements *appear* less aggressive than Rousseau's. Not all men grasp the fine points of philosophy as well as he does, just as not all women are as sensitive to beauty as Wollstonecraft was. But this only underlines the masculinist point he is making. For he thought that he and his first wife were almost pure manifestations of the male and female principles: "Mary and myself perhaps each carried farther than to its common extent the characteristic of the sexes to which we belonged" (Godwin, *Memoirs* 216). The way he contrasts the functioning of his mind with Wollstonecraft's, of course, reproduces this scheme. Wollstonecraft "reasoned little," and *felt* much, and therefore approached to pure femininity. By the same token, Godwin, being even less sensitive than "some other men" to the "pleasures of the imagination," represented the pure "male," that is, the philosopher. Hence, Wollstonecraft was practically incapable of logical thinking because she was *all* woman. His life

with her made him a better, more agreeable man; what he supposed was his essential male character, however, was untouched: he remained a philosopher. Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, who once had presumed to be a philosopher, eventually gained enough sense to stop trying. Indeed, this is what her supposed conversion to “sensibility” amounts to.

The contradiction between this unquestionably patriarchal discourse and *A Vindication* is absolute. Wollstonecraft argued against giving “a sex to mind:” “considering woman as a whole (...) instead of a part of man, the inquiry is whether she have reason or not. If she have, which, for a moment, I will take for granted, she was not created merely to be the solace of man, and the sexual should not destroy the human character”(Vindication 122). This, she thought, could never be established until both sexes were given equal opportunities of developing the understanding. Wollstonecraft also argued that “the received opinion of female excellence” had been “separated by specious [and, one might add, male] reasoners from human excellence. Or,” she defiantly concludes, “they (...) kindly restore the rib, and make one moral being of a man and woman; not forgetting to give her all the ‘submissive charms,’” like Swedenborg and Rousseau had done (111, 122, 102). She also rejected, of course, the idea of the intellectual complementarity of the sexes, here expressed in her own words: “man was made to reason, woman to feel; (...) together, flesh and spirit, they make the most perfect whole, by blending happily reason and sensibility into one character” (132). Evidently, Godwin was one of the “specious reasoners” she mentions. Tragically, however, Wollstonecraft never realised it. Or perhaps she overestimated her influence on him, for, as we shall see later on, the views he would later express in *Memoirs* on the subject are clearly foreshadowed by, and perfectly consonant with *Political Justice*.

Wollstonecraft, then, being the most “womanly” of women, was also the least capable of reason. But, for Godwin this is precisely what made her the perfect companion for a philosopher. With him, she could finally exercise to the utmost “the art of communicating happiness:” “No one knew better than Mary how to extract sentiments of exquisite delight, from trifles, which suspicious

and formal wisdom would scarcely deign to remark” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 109). By creating a nurturing domestic environment, Wollstonecraft lessened the heavy burden of reason for him. In her society, the philosopher was evidently not as anxious not to be deceived as he once had been. He permitted himself to relax. As a result, his “manly” speculations became bolder, acquiring some of that charming feminine recklessness that characterised his bewitching companion, through whose influence the coldness of his logic was tempered with the warmth of feeling and the awful aridity of his precise reasonings softened. Through this apparently favourable assessment of Wollstonecraft’s influence of him, of course, one can clearly detect an hint of Godwin’s anxiety that she might have seduced him into error through her “female” charms.

In her finest writings, that is, when she kept to the proper province of the female mind, the “picturesque,” Wollstonecraft exercised, according to her husband, the same abilities that made her such an agreeable domestic companion. Thus, although he pays lip-service to Wollstonecraft’s ideas, Godwin actually weasel-words his way into an admission of what is known as the doctrine of the separate spheres. Wollstonecraft, I insist, vehemently opposed this view, and staunchly maintained that women as well as man were autonomous individuals, both intellectually and morally. And she also rejected, most emphatically, the idea that women’s only purpose in life was to please *men*, which clearly flows from Godwin’s rhetoric.

And of course, by applying the principle of the separate spheres to his critique of Wollstonecraft’s works, Godwin subjects them to a critical criterion that they were not designed to meet and which their author did not even recognise. *A Vindication* was certainly not a “picturesque” work, but a book that appealed to reason—or, as Godwin implies, a book that was intended to appeal to reason, for he thinks that Wollstonecraft had failed, as he thought she had to, in meeting this aim:

The public at large formed very different opinions respecting the character of the performance. Many of the sentiments are undoubtedly of a rather masculine



description. (...) There are also, it must be confessed, occasional passages of a stern and rugged feature, incompatible with the true stamina of the writer's character. But, if they did not belong to her fixed and permanent character, they belonged to her character *pro tempore*, and what she thought, she scorned to qualify.

Yet, along with this rigid, and somewhat amazonian temper, which characterized some parts of the book, it is impossible not to remark a luxuriance of imagination, and a trembling delicacy of sentiment, which would have done honour to a poet, bursting with all the visions of an Armida and a Dido. (*Memoirs* 75)

Like Brenda Ayres, I do not believe "Wollstonecraft would have been flattered" by his praise of her "'trembling delicacy of sentiment'" (*Betwixt* 30). Indeed, Godwin here makes a wholesale dismissal of the arguments in *A Vindication* by referring them to what he construes as the false "male"—that is, rational—persona he thought she had assumed in the book. Even worse, he maintains that her warm feelings shone through the flawed logic of the book. In other words, he claims that Wollstonecraft had revealed her true "feminine" self in despite of herself, her beliefs, and her intentions, thus defeating the argument she was trying to make.

The best part of Wollstonecraft's book, then, would be its emotional content. Since "sensibility" is the peculiar characteristic of the female mind, the display of "feeling" should be the object of a book written by a woman. Wollstonecraft, being the most womanly of women, was, therefore, particularly endowed to write a moving book. By the same token, however, she was also the least qualified to write a rational book. Thus, Godwin effectively demolishes *A Vindication*, for any reader who approaches Wollstonecraft's vigorous political treaty in search of pathetic *tableaux* must be sorely disappointed. It is nothing if not argument, and, this is exactly what Wollstonecraft intended: "I wish (...) rather to address the head than the heart" (*Vindication* 96). Wollstonecraft's arguments are precisely what Godwin is construing, by implication, as the unduly "masculine" part of her book. These arguments, he further implies, though they may seem so, are not truly rational,

nor even reasonable, because she was not really “masculine,” hence, not truly rational. As Godwin sees it, they are rather the pseudo-rational arguments of a pseudo-masculine woman.

Godwin thus presents *A Vindication* as an act of intellectual transgenderism. He forgets to mention that this was exactly how Wollstonecraft expected most people would perceive it, and also that she had refuted, by argument, the accusation:

from every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women; but where are they to be found? If by this appellation men mean to inveigh against their ardour in hunting, shooting, and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind;—all those who view them with a [philosophical] eye must, I should think, wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine

(Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 74)

Wollstonecraft thought that in order to change society, language itself had to be revised: “the word masculine,” she maintained, “was only a bugbear” (*Vindication* 76). For her, therefore, the phrase “masculine woman” was a contradiction in terms, unless “masculine” meant “rational,” in which case, she ironically challenges her male public to follow her example: “I presume that *rational* men will excuse me for endeavouring to persuade them to become more masculine and respectable” (*Vindication* 76).

Thus, she very deliberately set out to write what the world would perceive as a monstrously masculine book, with the view to confound the very conceptions of intellectual differences between the sexes to which Godwin attempts to reconcile her:

Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising the weak elegance of mind, exquisite

sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to shew that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex; and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone.

(...) wishing rather to persuade by the force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods.

(Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 75)

Wollstonecraft certainly did not aim to please a patriarchal establishment which, as Godwin implies, was comprised almost exclusively of “literary men” (*Memoirs* 121). The conclusion is inevitable. Clemit and Walker term *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* “Godwin’s frankest vindication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s beliefs and conduct” (42). This, appearing in their introduction to that book, is meant to put the reader in what they regard as the proper frame of mind. But the statement could not be more misleading, unless, of course, we credit Godwin’s claim that Wollstonecraft had completely recanted the opinions she had expressed in the book to which his title refers—which, for reasons that may appear obvious by now, but which I try to clarify below, appears to me a wholly implausible hypothesis.

*Memoirs* is in fact an assassination of Wollstonecraft’s character as an author. First, Godwin questions her ability to carry off her intentions, that is, of writing a rational book, and then he compliments her for doing the exact opposite of what she intended. Finally, assuming a bizarre essentialist position on personal identity, Godwin says that the author of *A Vindication* was *not* the true Wollstonecraft, and purports to correct the public’s perception of her character with the authority of the only man to whom she had supposedly revealed her true self, attributing to her all that “sweet docility” which she thought was falsely and perversely associated with femininity.

Godwin's unacknowledged overriding purpose was to redeem his wife's character from the accusation of masculinity, and this required showing that she had the exquisite sensibility attributed to her sex, and very little of the male intellectual traits. He calls her "the greatest ornament her sex ever had to boast! A woman, with sentiments as pure, as refined, and as delicate, as ever inhabited a human heart!" (Godwin, *Memoirs* 108). She helped the cause of her sex not by argument, as she intended—that was man's way, Godwin thought—but by melting the public into tears: "The Vindication of the Rights of Woman is undoubtedly a very unequal performance, and eminently deficient in method and arrangement. When tried by the hoary and long-established laws of literary composition, it can scarcely maintain its claim to be placed in the first class of human productions" (76). As an intellectual product, therefore, the book is worthless, but as an emotional document Godwin claimed it was invaluable: "Mary Wollstonecraft will perhaps hereafter be found to have performed more substantial service for the cause of her sex, than all the other writers, male or female, that ever felt themselves animated in the behalf of oppressed and injured beauty" (76).

Though he did not scruple to make the most unflattering insinuations about his wife, Godwin now once again decides to be gallant, and uses "beauty" as a synonym of "woman." There is perhaps no greater insult to Wollstonecraft's memory in the entire book. She spent hundreds of pages arguing against the notion that women were the "fair sex." Hers was not the cause of "beauty," but, as her title indicates, of justice. In fact, as she saw it, the struggle for gender equality was as much the cause of women as it was of men. As she conceived it, this was a struggle for the dignity of humanity. Godwin's sexual revision of Wollstonecraft, therefore, "not only destroys her reputation, but (...) belittles her writing and theory, pitching her as a 'woman of feeling' in contrast to the 'man of reason'" (Caine, qtd. In Ayres, *Betwixt* 30).

Godwin claims, however, that by the time she died his wife had completely lost her "ruggedness," meaning by this that she had repudiated the "masculine" feelings she had expressed in *A Vindication*. According to him, she had overgrown them as well as the book itself. The reader

who wished to know the real Wollstonecraft should not waste time with that failed book, and is instead advised to proceed directly to the later *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), where Godwin thought all the exquisite sensibility of her delicate character was displayed unalloyed, without the dross of “masculine” feelings that had affected all her previous literary efforts:

perhaps a book of travels that so irresistibly seizes on the heart, never, in any other instance, found its way from the press. The occasional harshness and ruggedness of character, that diversify her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, here totally disappear. If ever there was a book calculated to make a man fall in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book. She speaks of her sorrows, in a way that fills us with melancholy, and dissolves us in tenderness, at the same time that she displays a genius which commands all our admiration. Affliction had tempered her heart to a softness almost more than human; and the gentleness of her spirit seems precisely to accord with all the romance of unbounded attachment.

Thus softened and improved, thus fraught with imagination and sensibility, with all, and more than all, ‘that youthful poets fancy, when they love,’ she returned to England, and, if he so pleased, to the arms of her former lover.

(Godwin, *Memoirs* 95)

*Letters* is here hailed as the expression of the femininity Wollstonecraft had supposedly ceased to deny; that is, of her true *sexual* identity. Whereas her previous efforts had been “diversified”—notice the patronizing euphemism for “spoil”—this book was the epitome of “female” sensibility, in its purest form, as opposed to male rationality. Godwin’s praise of *Letters* is ultimately no less damaging to Wollstonecraft’s reputation than his scathing criticism of *A Vindication* had been. As Brenda Ayres points out, he “gives her no credit for the substance of the book—only for the feminine emotion” (*Betwixt* 131). That is all he ever gives her credit for. In fact,

he implies that by that time Wollstonecraft was past even trying to be rational—that is, in his terms, she had ceased to ape man—, and that this was what made the book better than its predecessor. This is, incidentally, a passage in which the resemblance between Godwin and the narrator of “Ligeia” is particularly striking. Expressions like “softness almost more than human,” with its suggestion of an angelic nature alien to the earth, for example; or “the romance of unbounded attachment” to the unworthy Imlay, which perfectly parallels Poe’s “more than womanly abandonment to a love, alas! all unmerited, all unworthily bestowed,” bespeak the same kind of posthumous ideological reframing of the dead wife’s memory that we have seen in that tale (“Ligeia” 317).

Godwin reduces *Letters* to a sentimental outburst by a martyr of sensibility, only interesting as a heart-rending document of the self-sacrificing love of a woman for a man that did not deserve her, Gilbert Imlay, her companion at the time, in whose behalf Wollstonecraft had travelled to Scandinavia as a business agent in a desperate attempt to save their relationship. Godwin implies that the “heart” of woman must be “tempered” by the sacrifice for a man that does not deserve her.

The claim that her book was “calculated to make a man fall in love with its author” is another insult to all Wollstonecraft stood for. As she regretfully remarked, pleasing men was all that was expected of a woman. Enslaved by man, woman “has never thought, much less acted for herself. She has only learned to please men,” and needs a “husband to supply the place of reason” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 117). Godwin, therefore, projects on Wollstonecraft the very stereotypes she subverted in *A Vindication*. Indeed, his sexualised praise of *Letters* does to her work what his description of their marriage did to her life. A woman is made to please, and to please *men*; and her book is an extension of her person. Wollstonecraft had changed. She was no longer the wild woman who, Godwin writes, had once been guilty of a “too contemptuous and intemperate treatment of the great man” Edmund Burke (Godwin, *Memoirs* 73).

Indeed, Godwin implies that when she wrote her “vindications,” Wollstonecraft had been, in manners and personal appearance, as “masculine” as her books. We have already detailed his

conception of *A Vindication* as an androgynous book, characterised by the contrast between its improperly “masculine” and its “feminine” parts. He thought that:

The contradiction, to the public apprehension, was equally great, as to the person of the author, as it was when they considered the temper of the book. In the champion of her sex, who was described as endeavouring to invest them with all the rights of man, those whom curiosity prompted to seek occasion of beholding her, expected to find a sturdy, muscular, raw-boned virago; and they were not a little surprised, when, instead of all this, they found a woman, lovely [this is the key word] in her person, and, in the best and most engaging sense, feminine in her manners.

(Godwin, *Memoirs* 76)

After all, she was a proper woman, says Godwin. But when we pause to think for a minute, we realise he is actually validating the expectation he attributes to the public concerning the appearance of the author of a feminist essay, thus indirectly endorsing the kind of prejudice that Wollstonecraft’s friend Mary Hays mentioned in regard to Catharine Macaulay. He certainly seems to have been himself surprised by finding that Wollstonecraft was not what he terms an “amazon.”

However, piling insult upon insult, Godwin indirectly admits that, lovely though she was, Wollstonecraft’s appearance at the time she wrote *A Vindication* was in keeping with the expectations her book created—at least, on a male readership that shared Godwin’s prejudices. But all that changed for the better, says Godwin, when she fell in love with the painter Henry Fuseli:

She began to think that she had been too rigid, in the laws of frugality and self-denial with which she set out in her literary career; and now added to the neatness and cleanliness which she had always scrupulously observed a certain degree of elegance, and those temperate indulgences in furniture and accommodation, from which a sound and uncorrupted taste never fails to derive pleasure. (*Memoirs* 79)

Here is another textbook example of the kind of malicious weasel-wording at which Scott's Donnerhugel and Poe's bereaved husbands were so adept. Had Wollstonecraft's personal hygiene ever been brought into question? If so, this was probably the first time any intimation of it ever saw its way to print. By implicitly denying an accusation before it had been made, Godwin actually raises a suspicion which he indirectly admits was not unfounded. He gives us to understand, through all this, that before Fuseli came along, Wollstonecraft had been a case of arrested sexual development, and that this was equally noticeable in her writing and in her personal appearance.

Supposedly, she found then that she was "formed for domestic affection," but Fuseli, who was forty years her senior and married, rejected her, and so, according to Godwin, it was not until 1793, when she became involved with Gilbert Imlay, that Wollstonecraft had a chance to develop her true nature (*Memoirs* 81). During her association with the father of her first child she finally achieved, her future husband implies, full "feminine" maturity, sexually as well as sentimentally. And Godwin consistently equates femininity with loveliness. According to his unhappy simile: "She was a like a serpent upon a rock, that casts its slough, and appears again with the brilliancy, the sleekness, and the elastic activity of its happiest age. She was playful, full of confidence, kindness and sympathy. Her eyes assumed new lustre, and her cheeks new colour and smoothness. Her voice became cheerful; her temper overflowing with universal kindness" (88).

Is the oldest, most enduring symbol of temptation in Western culture the best Godwin could come up with to illustrate his future wife's transformation? Indeed, after intimating that his wife was the most purely spiritual of women, now he tacitly associates her with the idea of carnality, thereby deploying the two poles of the conventional sentimental representation of woman. The symbol he chooses, the serpent, carries with it the negative view of sexuality inherent to the biblical myth of the Fall. His handling of the image particularly evokes the ideas of lubricity and duplicity. All this, however, seems so out of place, so contradictory to his statements about Wollstonecraft, that we get the feeling the effect is unintended.



The only relevant traits of the comparison are—must be—the beauty of the serpent, and the fact that it is restored by the shedding of the old, tattered skin, with a shiny new one. But the other associations evoked by his comparison cannot be dismissed offhand, by stipulation: we simply cannot think of serpents without being reminded of those other associations—one suspects Godwin also had these ideas at the back of his mind. In this, as in many other matters, the idea that Godwin could have been unaware of the effect he achieved is incredible. At some level, he must have been aware of what he was saying, just as he must have been aware that he was destroying Wollstonecraft's reputation. At the same time, however, such awkward remarks have the air of involuntary slips of the pen. We really get the impression Godwin was not consciously aware of the *obvious* implications of this embarrassingly revealing passage. This, then, is what I mean when I say that *Memoirs* and Poe's tales about learned women share the same singular tone.

Much worse than Godwin's admission that Wollstonecraft *seemed* masculine is the complementary assertion that she *was*, in fact, very feminine, in the double sense of being lovely and devoted to domesticity. Indeed, this carries the insinuation that she recognised the error of her past ways and renounced all that she had struggled for to devote herself to a man, which is much more damaging to her character as an intellectual than the accusation of masculinity, which, as we have seen, Wollstonecraft thought the inevitable consequence of her outspoken advocacy of equal rights and opportunities for women.

In fact, Godwin tacitly construes her aggressive arguments as a consequence of her long celibacy. She resented men, in other words, because she had not yet been able to get herself a male lover. Therefore, Godwin implies, completely misconstruing her book in the process, she resented all men. With Imlay, however: "Her confidence was entire; her love was unbounded. Now, for the first time in her life she gave a loose to all the sensibilities of her nature" (Godwin, *Memoirs* 89). Fittingly enough, for Godwin's purposes, it was during this period that Wollstonecraft became pregnant for the first time.

Thus, Godwin deploys that “morality that sanctifies or vilifies all women into submission” (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 64). In other words, he posthumously “domesticates” Wollstonecraft. I am appropriating a term used by Wollstonecraft herself, who conceived herself to be writing against those “men who, by their writings, have most earnestly laboured to domesticate women” (*Vindication* 133). Indeed, when he says that Wollstonecraft was “formed for domestic affection,” he implies that she was *not* “formed” for public intervention, or rational debate, and, in this sense, effectively “domesticated” Wollstonecraft in precisely the sense she here gives to the word.

According to *Memoirs*, Wollstonecraft finally found the error of her past ways, recognising that the true “feminine” character is only properly expressed in the home, through the attachment, or more precisely submission, to a man. Her involvement with Fuseli would have first shaken her convictions, and by the time she became pregnant of Imlay’s child her ideas had suffered a complete reversal. Indeed, Godwin proposes “to state her principles upon” the matter of conjugality, “such at least as they were when I knew her best,” thereby implicitly recognising the contradiction between the ideas he attributes to her and the opinions she had expressed in *A Vindication* (*Memoirs* 79). According to his narrative this was a veritable conversion. I must insist, however, there is no textual evidence of this conversion in any of her works, for, as we shall see, that insoluble contradiction Godwin imagined existed between the “vindications” and the books Wollstonecraft wrote after meeting Fuseli, like *Letters* and *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*, simply does not exist.

Buried in Godwin’s text, however, or rather concealed in its surface, there is another layer of even more viciously misogynous innuendo. After having defused her polemical writings with the double argument that they were unduly “masculine” but essentially “feminine,” he now depicts Wollstonecraft as a repentant virago, who was reformed through heterosexual love. The wild amazon, whose character had been distorted into a simulacrum of masculinity, was finally tamed through copulation; cured of her masculine illusions, and converted to the doctrine of the separate

spheres. *Memoirs* is, in this sense, clearly Godwin's "answer to the accusations that his wife was 'masculine,' celibate,' 'amazonian,' 'homosexual or bisexual,'" and consequently "[m]ore an endorsement of himself as a lover" than anything else (Ayres, *Betwixt* 28).

Sadly, Imlay was not worthy of the treasure he had discovered. Still, as we have seen, Godwin thought this may have been a blessing in disguise, for he believed Wollstonecraft's misfortunes had refined her personality. When he finally came along, she was finally ready to express all her exquisite sensibility: "no two persons ever found in each other's society, a satisfaction more pure and refined. (...) She seemed to have attained that situation, which her disposition and character imperiously demanded, but which she had never before attained; and her understanding and her heart felt the benefit of it. (...) She was a worshipper of domestic life" (Godwin, *Memoirs* 109).

As he domesticates the woman, Godwin also domesticates her work. The same supposed inability to organise her thought that disqualified Wollstonecraft for polemical writing, was, Godwin thought, perfectly acceptable in "sentimental works," which is how he classifies both *Letters* and her fiction. Not that the limitations of the author were any less conspicuous there; but they were irrelevant, if not positively a merit, in books which he thought aimed solely at the communication of emotion. In fact, Godwin seems to have felt that the same flaws that had infuriated him so in *A Vindication*, were charming in a properly feminine work. Godwin's appraisal of Wollstonecraft's first novel *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) illustrates this. Always the most severe critic of his wife's work, he thought the book had been, as far as composition is concerned, a rather inauspicious debut, but he thought that this was perfectly immaterial:

The story is nothing. He that looks into a book only for incident, will probably lay it [Wollstonecraft's novel] down with disgust. But the feelings are of the truest and most exquisite class; every circumstance is adorned with that species of imagination, which enlists itself under the banners of delicacy and sentiment. A work of sentiment,

as it is called, is too often another name for a work of affectation. He that should imagine that the sentiments of this book are affected, would indeed be entitled to our profoundest commiseration. (Godwin, *Memoirs* 66)

The “story,” the actual design of the plot, requires method, constant and undeviating attention to detail, as well as the ability to keep the whole steadily in view. In other words, the “story” required some cold, dispassionate, manly thinking, and Wollstonecraft, being a woman, and, according to him, one in whom what he regarded as the peculiar weakness of her sex, excitability, was carried to rashness, was quite incapable of this. The only interest of her books was, therefore, the “ingenuousness” of the feelings she expressed. Thus, the same inability to control her emotions and think coolly that made her a bad writer, strictly speaking, was the strength of her best, because least ambitious, work, which represented emotion almost “unadulterated” by reflection.

Again, Godwin reduces Wollstonecraft, and through her all women, to sensibility. And thus, *in absentia* he corrects her published work, submitting her to the reason of man—submitting her, that is, to the reason of the manly philosopher. At his hands, she became a symbol of the very idealised conception of womanhood against which she fought. She became the domestic angel of patriarchal ideology, who proves her worth—her superhuman worth—by the ultimate sacrifice to love, which he, like all the writers she attacked in *A Vindication*, construes as the only way by which a woman can purify her sensuous nature.

He compares her with Dido, Calista, and Armida, all of whom perfectly correspond to the ideal woman, devoted to her male lover to the point of sacrificing her life or dignity, as she was typically portrayed in sentimental literature. The first kills herself for the love of Aeneas when he rejects her; the second is a character in Nicholas Rowe’s *The Fair Penitent* (1702) who kills herself for being forced to marry a man she did not love; the last is a beautiful Saracen queen in Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581) who plans to kill herself, but instead consents to become her Christian lover’s slave. In the following chapter, Godwin tells us that during the time of her

involvement with Fuseli “her sensibility was destroying her,” and also that “Mary was (...) a female Werter” (*Memoirs* 87, 88). She was simply too good for this corrupt world, Godwin implies. This is also the moral the femicide extracts from his own story.

And like Poe’s femicide narrators, Godwin has a way of smuggling a hidden barb into every compliment he pays his wife. Aside from the ideological deconstruction of her works through the rhetoric of sensibility, however, these barbs often take the form of some apparently gratuitous insults which often disturb his superficial meaning. Indeed, if on the one hand Godwin overtly disparages Wollstonecraft’s public intervention by portraying her as a sweet, accommodating, and very spiritual woman, possessing all the virtues conventionally attributed to her sex, on the other he defeats his own argument by suggesting that she was, in reality, at the same time aggressively “masculine,” and overly sensuous.

Godwin’s account of Wollstonecraft’s one-sided romantic involvement with Fuseli in the first edition of *Memoirs*, which, as Godwin puts it, put an end to a period of “upwards of thirty years” of “celibacy and seclusion,” illustrates my meaning: “Never was there a woman on the face of the earth more alien to that mire and grossness, in which the sensual part of our species are delighted to wallow” (*Memoirs* 209n). Considering Wollstonecraft did not die a virgin, the statement is manifestly hyperbolic. In the very next sentence, however, Godwin makes what appears to be a blunder: “no one knew more perfectly how to assign the enjoyments of affection their respective rank, or to maintain in virgin and unsullied purity the chasteness,” and here comes another awkward remark, “of her mind” (209n). Her *mind*, as opposed to her body. Thus, Godwin effectively draws attention to the fact that she did not keep her body “chaste,” thus indirectly reminding his reader of her future transgressions to the moral conventions of her time, for which she was almost universal maligned, and even ostracised by many of her friends. In fact, the final words of his sentence, by directly contradicting his initial statement of Wollstonecraft’s “spirituality,” work

almost as a punchline. Thus, innuendo works against Godwin's ostensible rhetoric, which, again, is exactly what happens in "Morella" and "Ligeia."

Some may be inclined to argue that Godwin and Wollstonecraft were at the forefront of a modern cultural movement that questioned the absolute value of chasteness, and that their own experiment in cohabitation proved it. This, however, would be a misunderstanding. While this may be said of Wollstonecraft, who openly tackled the role of sexuality in conjugality, and even acknowledged female desire, Godwin clearly states that the indulgence of sensual pleasure was "gross," and this perfectly reflects his overall view of sexuality. Indeed, although he condescended to get married, he consistently repudiated sexual pleasure—at least in public—and even went so far as to deny it. The point is that Godwin makes his wife a compliment she manifestly does not deserve. With the most hyperbolic sentimental rhetoric, he tells us that she was an angel on earth, but appears not to realise that he ridicules his own claim by showing us that she was not as "alien" to all that "grossness" of the flesh he had repudiated in the strongest possible terms. But then, she never claimed to be an "angel"—on the contrary, she repudiated this sort of language.<sup>156</sup> Godwin, of course, also ridicules himself by such evident contradictions, which afford the strongest possible evidence that he was not fully conscious of the effect he had produced. I can think of only one plausible explanation for this. Godwin's overpowering urge to destroy the woman who had threatened his fragile male pride, of which he appears to have been unaware, seems to have clouded his judgement.

Of course, he did not mean this crude joke at his wife's expense. Still, had he intended a satire on his wife's sexual morals, he could not have conveyed the impression that she was promiscuous more effectively than he did. Godwin comes across as a man who vainly attempts to convince himself that his wife was an "angel." Still, although the comic effect was certainly

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<sup>156</sup> For example, in a footnote to ch. IV of *A Vindication*, entitled "Observations on the State of Degradation to Which Woman is Reduced by Various Causes:" "Into what inconsistencies do men fall when they argue without the compass of principles. Women, weak women, are compared with angels; yet, a superior order of beings should be supposed to possess more intellect than man; or, in what does their superiority consist?" (Wollstonecraft 121n).

unintended, it is perfectly consistent with Godwin's sentimental rhetoric. Indeed, the typical sentimental representation of the ideal woman is rooted on a paradox. On the one hand, she is completely identified with the senses, hence with the flesh and the earth; on the other, she is depicted as a purely spiritual being whose nature is essentially alien to earth, and especially to the pleasures of the flesh. Such representations are themselves based on a paradoxical understanding of the term "sensibility," which simultaneously expressed the susceptibility to sensuous impressions and a connection with a world of pure spirituality. Therefore, the seemingly unintended effect is not inconsistent with Godwin's argument, but flows from a paradox that is integral to his design. In a way, therefore, one might even say the joke reinforces that design, but also its fundamentally and irredeemably unrealistic quality.

This passage, it is true, did not make it to the second edition. But, although it lost some of its crudeness in the revision, the insinuation remained in place. If anything, it was even clearer in the revised second edition: "She visited him; her visits were returned. Notwithstanding the inequality of their years, Mary was not of a temper to live upon terms of intimacy with a man of merit and genius, without loving him. The delight she enjoyed in his society, she transferred by association to his person" (Godwin, *Memoirs* 78). In addition to making Wollstonecraft appear constitutionally promiscuous, Godwin depicts her as being completely dependent on male "genius." "As a painter, it was impossible she should not wish to see his works, and consequently to frequent his house;" and, once there, she just could not retain her equanimity around a man who "amused, delighted and instructed her" (78). It was all perfectly inevitable. She just could not be intimate with a remarkable man without falling in love with him.

What the joke lost in crudeness in the revision, it gained in the ridiculous vanity of the writer—for Godwin seems not to realise how inappropriate the indirect compliment he pays himself here is. Brenda Ayres, who unlike most other critics who dealt with *Memoirs* is not convinced that love forgives all, maintained that the book was an unreliable biography of Wollstonecraft not only

because of “the distortion and paucity of facts,” but also and chiefly because “Godwin uses it as a forum to inflate his own ego at the expense of his deceased wife” (Ayres, *Betwixt* 29).

Godwin appears to be—he must have been—unconscious of the fact that the implied compliment he pays himself backfires on him. It may be tempting to interpret this evident lack of conscious awareness of the obvious meaning of his text in psychoanalytic terms, but I think that would be digging too deep. The unintended meaning runs in a very shallow undercurrent—one might say as shallow as the writer appears. His offended pride seems to have blinded him to the flattering implications of his book. Wollstonecraft had evidently threatened Godwin’s brittle ego. The author’s ill-will towards his subject is apparent in every page of the *Memoirs*, but he was blind to the clues by which he inadvertently revealed the true story of his relationship with Wollstonecraft. These tell a story of petty grudges that exposes Godwin’s claims of a life of perfect domestic bliss as a pious fiction.

This ill-will is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Godwin’s account of Wollstonecraft’s work as a teacher:

No person was ever better formed for the business of education; if it be not a sort of absurdity to speak of a person as formed for an inferior object, who is in possession of talents, in the fullest degree adequate to something on a more important and comprehensive scale. Mary had a quickness of temper (...) She was occasionally severe and imperious in her resentments; and, when she strongly disapproved, was apt to express her censure in terms that gave a very humiliating sensation to the person against whom it was directed. Her displeasure however never assumed its severest form, but when it was barbed by disappointment. When she expected little, she was not very rigid in her censure of error. (*Memoirs* 59)

This of course means that, however humiliating her “censure” may have been, her silence was even more humiliating. Godwin portrays Wollstonecraft as the strictest, most terrifying



schoolmistress in existence. She may have been “formed” for the “inferior” business of teaching—and in that sentence alone lurks a world of malignant insinuation that I will let go by untouched—, but let the student thread carefully who takes her lessons. Are these the traits that peculiarly qualified Wollstonecraft for the business of education? The anarchist philosopher surely does not mean to extol the advantages of authoritarianism in the classroom.

But let the reader withhold his judgement. In the sequence, we find Godwin is not really talking of the teacher: “to whatever the defects of her temper might amount,” and he evidently thought they amounted to a lot, “they were never exercised upon her inferiors in station or age. (...) With children she was the mirror of patience” (*Memoirs* 59). But then, why did he decide to mention defects that had nothing to do with his ostensible subject, her activity as a teacher? More importantly, if not to the children, to whom was that “censure” directed which gave such a “very humiliating sensation?” It is impossible not to guess that the great man himself had felt humiliated by her censure. Thus, he implies what Poe’s narrators flatly state: that his wife had become his teacher. And this humiliated him as much as it did them.

Brenda Ayres speaks of “Godwin’s conviction that she [Wollstonecraft] possessed an extraordinary proficiency in teaching,” remarking that in this, as in all other matters, Godwin credited her only with supposedly feminine virtues, and never with reason, while also noticing that he “presents very few details about her experiences with the Kingsboroughs,” for whom she had worked as a governess, “other than to compliment her for liberating the children and ‘govern[ing] them by their affections only’” (Ayres, *Betwixt* 28; Godwin, *Memoirs* 65). On this point, however, I think she credits Godwin with more good sense than he displays, for he actually defeats his own rhetoric, effectively pointing out to us that she was not as conventionally “feminine” as he himself appears to have intended to suggest.

“I have heard her say,” he writes, “that she was never concerned in the education of one child, who was not personally attached to her;” had he stopped here, he would have conveyed the

idea that she ruled her pupils with affection, but he simply cannot seem to resist adding “and earnestly concerned not to incur her displeasure” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 60). This final twist changes everything. She never even had to scold her students because they were as terrified to contradict her as Godwin implies he had been. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about *Memoirs* is that Godwin seems often to succumb to the temptation of taking a cheap shot at his wife. Again, he tells us that she was very feminine, while *showing* this was not the case. Such perplexing, apparently pointless, insinuations strengthen my hypothesis that he concealed his resentment even from himself.

Here all the not so vague hints of wounded pride coalesce into a resented jab at Wollstonecraft. Like the narrator of “Ligeia,” Godwin uses his narrative about his wife to exact posthumous retaliation for the humiliating feeling she had given him, and to assert himself as a great man. Earlier in the narrative, indeed, he had already accused Wollstonecraft of not showing great men the respect he thought was due to them. He recalls being greatly displeased at her on this account on their very first meeting, in 1791:

We touched on a considerable variety of topics, and particularly on the characters and habits of certain eminent men. Mary, as has already been observed, had acquired, in a very blameable degree, the practice of seeing every thing on the gloomy side, and bestowing censure with a plentiful hand, where circumstances were in any respect doubtful. I, on the contrary, had a strong propensity, to favourable construction, and particularly, where I found unequivocal marks of genius, strongly to incline to the supposition of generous and manly virtue. (Godwin, *Memoirs* 80)

At the time Godwin could not conceal that he was offended, just as he had been offended, in glancing over her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, by Wollstonecraft’s irreverence for the “great man” Edmund Burke. As Ayres puts it: “Whether Godwin realized it or not, he seems to have been threatened personally as a man that a woman dared to take on a man of such stature as Burke” (*Betwixt* 29).

Of course, Godwin implies that Wollstonecraft had, at that time, no just appreciation of *men* in general. Thus, he indirectly devalues her criticism of Burke as the expression of a resentment which is implicitly construed as the result of her frustration as a woman. For Godwin every woman was “formed for domestic affection,” and Wollstonecraft was more so than most. She needed a man, but she did not know it. Thus, in effect, Godwin, once again reiterates that typical masculine prejudice against female intellectuals that Mary Hays would later describe, as we have seen, in her portrait of Catharine Macaulay.

Yet, although he accuses Wollstonecraft of being resentful, it is his own resentment that is displayed to greatest effect in his book. Wollstonecraft had very good reasons to censure Burke and Rousseau, and stated them very clearly. Godwin, on the other hand, appears to have been carried away by his feelings about her. This, the unintended ridicule in Godwin’s writing about Wollstonecraft, is highlighted by Poe’s tales narrated by men that harbour similarly ambivalent feelings for their dead wives.

Poe had a very keen sense of ridicule. Godwin, on the contrary, took everything very seriously, himself most of all, and as a result often sounded pompous and self-centred. There was apparently room for only one philosopher in the Godwin household. By rewriting Wollstonecraft as a sentimental, thoroughly “feminine” character Godwin got rid of the competition. Yet, his resentment exceeds this ideological neutralisation of Wollstonecraft—for Godwin cannot help *showing* that Wollstonecraft was not as “feminine,” in the sense he gave to the word, as he says she was. Thus, Godwin ends up writing a very unphilosophical book, filled with gratuitous apparently incongruous aggression, to prove that Wollstonecraft’s books were unphilosophical.

He appears to have been himself not fully aware of what he was doing. This could well have been the secret of his success, just as it was the secret of the success of Poe’s narrators. Before fooling the public, in other words, these men appear to have thoroughly fooled themselves. This, incidentally, is precisely the picture Poe paints of the author of *Memoirs* in his review of *Lives of the*

*Necromancers* (1834), the last book Godwin published before his death in 1836. This is a short article misleadingly titled “Godwin’s Necromancy” that appeared in December 1835 in the *Southern Literary Messenger* only days after Poe had assumed the editorship of the paper:

There is about all the writings of Godwin, one peculiarity which we are not sure that we have ever seen pointed out for observation, but which, nevertheless, is his chief idiosyncrasy—setting him peculiarly apart from all other *literati* of the day. We allude to an air of mature thought—of deliberate premeditation pervading, in a remarkable degree, even his most common-place observations. He never uses a hurried expression, or hazards either an ambiguous phrase, or a premature opinion. (...) We are never tired of his terse, nervous, and sonorous periods—for their terseness, their energy, and even their melody, are made, in all cases, subservient to the sense with which they are invariably fraught. No English writer, with whom we have any acquaintance, with the single exception of Coleridge, has a fuller appreciation of the value of *words*; and none is more nicely discriminative between closely-approximating meanings. (70)

Poe, at least, is usually very deliberate, and the ambiguity of the statement, coming from him, appears to me a sure sign of derision. When he says Godwin’s thinking *seems* mature; that his writing *seems* premeditated, we may be sure he means *every word*. As Pollin remarks, this passage clearly implies Poe’s “familiarity with other works by Godwin as well as with critical writing about him” (*Discoveries* 110). Indeed, his statements are not about the “Necromancy,” as he calls it, in particular, but about Godwin’s writing in general.

The extravagant, albeit dubious, praise lavished on the author is soon subverted by the same kind of innuendo that characterises Godwin’s biography of Wollstonecraft. In this book, Poe tells us, Godwin apparently intended an exposé of the impostures that had been perpetrated on mankind throughout the ages by pretended magicians. Yet, Poe chooses to tell us what the author had *not*

done, before giving us to understand, in apparent contradiction with what he had just written, that he could not exactly tell what it was that the author had intended:

Unlike the work of Brewster, the *Necromancy* [Poe never uses the actual title of the book] of Mr. Godwin is not a *Treatise on Natural Magic*. It does not pretend to show the *manner* in which delusion acts upon mankind—at all events, this is not the *object* of the book. The design, if we understand it, is to display in their widest extent, the great range and wild extravagancy of the imagination of man. It is almost superfluous to say that in this he has fully succeeded. (“Godwin’s *Necromancy*” 70)

Thus, Poe undermines Godwin in two ways. First, by casting doubts on the intelligibility of his design. According to Poe’s criticism, as we have seen, this was inexcusable. Secondly, by making an unflattering comparison with Sir. David Brewster’s *Letters on Natural Magic* (1832), from which Poe himself apparently borrowed most of the material for his article on “Maelzel’s Chess Player” (*Southern Literary Messenger*, April 1836). While that author attempted to *explain* some of the more spectacular hoaxes ever recorded, Godwin, Poe tells us, succeeded only in showing how gullible man can be, without explaining how the illusions were perpetrated. And what is more, he is not altogether sure that this was Godwin’s intention. The implication is, of course, that Godwin may have involuntarily displayed his own gullibility.

Indeed, Poe, through his usual feats of misdirection, leads the reader to overlook the manifest irony of the only positive statement he makes concerning Godwin’s “*Necromancy*,” which is reiterated throughout the piece. The irony hits the heights of ridicule in the following passage:

The avowed purpose of the volume now before us is to exhibit a wide view of human credulity. ‘To know’ — says Mr. Godwin — ‘the things that are not, and cannot be, but have been imagined and believed, is the most curious chapter in the annals of man.’  
*In extenso* we differ with him.

There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in thy philosophy.

There are many things, too, in the great circle of human experience, more curious than even the records of human credulity—but that they form *one* of the most curious chapters, we were at all times ready to believe, and had we been in any degree skeptical, the *Lives of the Necromancers* would have convinced us.

(“Godwin’s Necromancy” 70)

The brazen insolence of this equivocal passage belies Pollin’s claim that Poe idolised Godwin. In fact, it appears to me almost impossible to keep a straight face while reading this. Poe here suggests that Godwin’s writing was “fraught with meaning,” but that the writer had not always known what that meaning was. As if to illustrate his point, Poe’s text is itself “fraught with” a “meaning” that he makes it impossible to suppose was unintended. We cannot know what he had in mind that was more curious even than “human credulity,” but I could hazard some guesses, none of which is very creditable to the reviewed.

This kind of innuendo is especially significant in view of Godwin’s personal history. His reputation as a philosopher was, in those days, at its lowest ebb. Despite presenting himself as a rationalist, there had always been a visionary strain to Godwin, which became more pronounced in his later years, after Wollstonecraft’s death. As Pollin remarks in the following passage, Poe had, from his earliest references to him, emphasised this side of Godwin:

the earliest reference is in the tale “Loss of Breath,” published in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, September 1835, although composed much earlier. Poe remarks, “William Godwin, however, says in his ‘Mandeville,’ that ‘invisible things are the only realities,” and this, all will allow, is a case in point. It may be assumed that the observation, plucked from the end of Godwin’s novel, represents a reading of the entire work by Poe. Echoes of the quotation can be found in “Berenice,” also published in 1835. “Realities of the world affected me as visions ...” (...). The

mixture of the real and the unreal, of the world of the imagination and that of detailed, mundane reality, runs through the whole body of Poe's work. It is not surprising to find a strong echo of this very phrase in the preface to "Eureka," the work that Poe considered his greatest contribution to thought: "To the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities." (*Discoveries* 109)

I have my doubts that Poe took *Eureka* as seriously as modern critics tend to do, and the history of his handling of Godwin in his writing is itself an indication that he did not. What this shows us, is that Poe's unreliable, deluded narrators, and Poe's "dream" rhetoric itself, had from the start been associated in his mind with Godwin, who the American invariably portrays as an incorrigible visionary. It should be noticed, indeed, that the remark about *Mandeville* comes from the openly satirical tale "A Decided Loss." Poe, to be sure, did not put faith in the dreams of his narrators. They evidently confused these dreams with realities, and by explicitly referring their deliriums to him, Poe suggests that so did Godwin.

Furthermore, by tracing an expression in "Berenice" to Godwin, Pollin shows that Poe had him particularly in mind when he created his first femicide, Egæus, and there is ample evidence to suggest that he was a reference also for the creation of the narrators of "Morella" and "Ligeia," tales which, being declared monuments to a learned wife, are even more reminiscent of Godwin. This in turn furnishes a point to the suggestions Poe makes in his review of the "Necromancy." Godwin was delirious and said more than he intended. This is certainly true of his *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft, which is certainly "fraught with" unintended "meaning." Unless—and here is the sting—unless Godwin really intimately meant what he said, in which case we would have to assume that he really hated Wollstonecraft. Indeed, by placing the emphasis of his criticism on deliberation, Poe implicitly rejects the kind of "sympathetic" criticism illustrated by most modern reading of *Memoirs*. By this term I mean the charitable practice of responding to what one thinks the writer meant to say, not to what he actually wrote. The point of the implied comparison between Godwin

and Poe's violent narrators, of course, is that only a femicide at heart could *mean* what Godwin wrote.

The parallel between "Ligeia" and "Morella," in particular, and Godwin's *Memoirs* brings into relief the ambiguity of his discourse. Although the ambiguity is incompatible with the declared aims of the writer, that does not mean that it can simply be dismissed—any more than the ambiguity in Poe's tales can be dismissed, like Wilbur and Thompson advise us to do. Indeed, Godwin appears to have come straight out of one of Poe's tales, and we can see through his rhetoric just as we can see through the absurdities of Poe's narrators.

In a brief notice of George Gilfillan's *Gallery of Literary Portraits*, which appeared in the antepenultimate issue of the *Broadway Journal*, in December 27, 1845, Poe singles out the article on Godwin as "the most original and judicious of these sketches," adding that he was "a very remarkable man, not even yet thoroughly understood" (Rev. of *Sketches of Modern Literature* 351).<sup>157</sup> Pollin saw this as a sign of "a new intensity in" Poe's "fervor for Godwin" (*Discoveries* 122). Yet, Gilfillan praises Godwin's fiction at the expense of his philosophy, which he criticises very harshly. His article, indeed, is typical of the way in which Godwin was commonly perceived in those days. By this time, the star of the man who had once been hailed by many as the leading philosopher of his generation had long since faded. The best that Gilfillan could say in defence of Godwin's most famous philosophical work, *Political Justice*, was that "its author was a harmless and sincere enthusiast," that "gossamer though its web was, it caught for a season such dragon-flies as Coleridge and Wordsworth," and, lastly, that "its more obnoxious parts were either expressly or silently renounced by the writer himself" ("William Godwin" 24). In other words, Godwin was a harmless fool, and should have confined himself to writing novels. For as a fiction writer, indeed, Gilfillan ranked him with the absolute best.

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157 Poe's very short text is a notice of the American reprint of Gilfillan's book entitled *Sketches of Modern Literature and Eminent Literary Men: Being a Gallery of Literary Portraits*.



The most remarkable thing about Gilfillan's article, however, is that it describes Godwin's fiction in a way that assumes a complete identification of the author with his first-person narrators. Godwin, Gilfillan wrote,

imagines a character after his own heart; a quiet, curious, prying, philosophical being, with a strong underdash of the morbid, if not of the mad; and he thickens around him the circumstances, which, by making him altogether a misanthrope, and nearly a maniac, bring out all the powers and the passions of his nature. (...) Each narrative takes the shape of an autobiography, and the incessant recurrence of the pronoun *I* transports you to a confessional, where you hear told you, in subdued tones, a tale which might "rouse the dead to hear."

(Gilfillan, "William Godwin" 19-20)

Gilfillan's appraisal of Godwin's fiction foreshadows, of course, what would later become the common critical representation of Poe's own work and character.<sup>158</sup> In fact, he "declares that" Godwin "founded a small but distinguished school of writers in England and America," which leads Pollin to wonder "whether Poe included himself in this group" (*Discoveries* 122). Indeed, Gilfillan identifies Godwin with his narrators in exactly the same way that critics of Poe's fiction have identified him with his. The portrait he thus derives of the author, therefore, has an uncanny resemblance with the idea most critics make of Poe, and indeed with the popular myth created around him.

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<sup>158</sup> It is worth remarking, however, that Gilfillan himself would later paint Poe with very different colours, in a biographical sketch of that author that appeared originally in the *London Critic* in 1854, and which clearly betrayed the influence of Griswold's infamous obituary. Gilfillan's sketch, incidentally, is an important landmark in the establishment of the mythology of Poe as the epitome of the damned poet. "Poets," Gilfillan tells us, "as a tribe, have been rather a worthless, wicked set of people; and certainly Edgar A. Poe, instead of being an exception, was probably *the* most worthless and wicked of all his fraternity. (...) He had absolutely no virtue or good quality, unless you call remorse a virtue, and despair a grace. Some have called him mad; but we confess we see no evidence of this in his history. He showed himself, in many instances, a cool, calculating, deliberate blackguard. (...) One might call him one of the Gadarene swine, filled with a devil, and hurrying down a steep place to perish in the waves; but none could deny that he was a 'swine of genius'" (Gilfillan, "Egdar Allan Poe" 326-27). Gilfillan particularly emphasised the singularity of Poe's character throughout his article: "In character he was certainly one of the strangest anomalies in the in the history of mankind;" "A case so strange as Poe's compels us into new and more searching forms of critical, as well as of moral analysis" (327, 331).

Poe was unquestionably aware of his debt to Godwin's fiction, which Gilfillan's article makes impossible to miss, but, by drawing attention to this article, specifically, Poe also brings to our attention the fact that precisely those characters on whom G. R. Thompson and Richard Wilbur have based their portrait of him as a superstitious misanthrope obsessed with the dead, particularly dead females, who spent his time poring over obscure and suspicious lore, and was haunted by mystical visions, had in fact much more in common with Godwin than they did with Poe. In those days, Godwin was known as an enthusiast and a misanthrope, as well as for his obsession with his late first wife. It was then common understanding, moreover, that he had destroyed her reputation with *Memoirs*.

While the fact is undeniable, most twentieth-century critics have tended to exculpate Godwin, and also to gloss over the ways in which he distorted Wollstonecraft's character and opinions. His contemporaries, however, were not as forbearing; in fact, for the most part, they were indignant. And then, after the death of Wollstonecraft, Godwin suddenly became, also like Poe's narrators, very interested in the occult. This, I insist, was how he was mostly remembered in Poe's time. This suggests that Poe was not merely passively influenced by Godwin's fiction, but that he deliberately created characters whose opinions and feelings resembled his, in order to poke fun at the older man. Indeed, the narrators which have persistently been regarded as alter-egos of Poe, appear to have been intended as caricatures of Godwin.

Modern critical discourse on Godwin, however, by concentrating on his philosophy, has obscured what was perceived in his time as his conversion from a rationalist philosopher with a visionary tendency, to a full-fledged visionary. Indeed, after the death of Wollstonecraft, Godwin, the well-respected author of *An Enquiry into Political Justice*, appeared to suffer a complete transformation. In 1799, he publishes *St. Leon*, a perplexing novel set in sixteenth century Europe and narrated in the first person by a man who found the proverbial philosopher's stone. According to the author's own preface, the novel reflected this change of heart on the subject of conjugality:

the affections and charities of private life being every where in this publication a topic of the warmest eulogium, while in the Enquiry concerning Political Justice they seemed to be treated with no great degree of indulgence and favour. (...) all I think it necessary to say on the present occasion is, that, for more than four years, I have been anxious for opportunity and leisure to modify some of the earlier chapters of that work in conformity with the sentiments inculcated in this.

(Godwin, Preface to *St. Leon* 52)

*St. Leon* is therefore ostensibly presented as a document of Godwin's conversion to domestic affection during his time with Wollstonecraft. However, the protagonist's wife is a mirror of patience, and of all those traits Godwin valued in a woman. She appears to be, in fact, all that he would have wanted Wollstonecraft to have been. By the time his "Necromancy," as Poe calls it, was published, nearly four decades later, Godwin was a shadow of his former self. The fashionable philosopher who once prided himself on his fine "metaphysical distinctions" had given way, to the morose, reclusive student of alchemy and witchcraft whom one could easily mistake with one of Poe's visionary narrators.

### 3 – The Conflicting Conceptions of Gender in Godwin and Wollstonecraft

In her book *Betwixt and Between: The Biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft* (2017), Brenda Ayres remarks that, although “[m]ost scholars agree that Godwin’s biography of Wollstonecraft is biased and unreliable,” “very few readers and scholars are willing to separate Wollstonecraft from Godwin’s image of her” (24, 25). This is in fact a natural effect of *Memoirs*, which presupposes the fundamental identification of the writer with his subject. Godwin, the repentant gamphobe, depicted his union with Wollstonecraft as the realisation of that original pre-sexual wholeness of “man” which underlies the biblical myth of creation. Through his union with Wollstonecraft the mythical “rib” had been symbolically restored to him. Each spouse had what the other lacked; together they made up a perfect and complete human being. This rationale allowed *Memoirs*, which, as has been pointed out by Mizi Myers, “is more an autobiography by Godwin than a biography of his wife,” to be regarded, for all intents and purposes, as Wollstonecraft’s autobiography (qtd. in Ayres, *Betwixt* 24).

This idea is simply incompatible with Wollstonecraft’s strictly individualist views. “Probably,” she wrote,

the prevailing opinion, that woman was created for man, may have taken its rise from Moses’s poetical story; yet, as very few, it is presumed, who have bestowed any serious thought on the subject, ever supposed that Eve was, literally speaking, one of Adam’s ribs, the deduction must be allowed to fall to the ground; or, only be so far admitted as it proves that man, from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion, and his invention to shew that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke, because [the whole creation was only created for his convenience or] pleasure. (*Vindication* 95)

In order that the mythical unity might be restored, woman had to be absorbed—or reabsorbed—into man. Wollstonecraft, affirming the principle of the priority of reason over revelation, which is inherent to the very structure of her religious thought, utterly rejected this myth:

I may be allowed to doubt whether woman were created for man: and, though the cry of irreligion, or even atheism, be raised against me, I will simply declare, that were an angel from heaven to tell me that Moses's beautiful, poetical cosmogony, and the account of the fall of man, were literally true, I could not believe what my reason told me was derogatory to the character of the Supreme Being: and, having no fear of the devil before mine eyes, I venture to call this a suggestion of reason, instead of resting my weakness on the broad shoulders of the first seducer of my frail sex.  
(Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 149)

Yet, Godwin's portrait of Wollstonecraft revolves around this very conception of gender complementarity. Her best work was not *A Vindication*, nor even *Letters Written During a Short Residence In Sweden*. He thought all her literary performances were flawed and fragmentary, and valuable only as documents of her suffering; her best work, he suggests, and that in which her character was expressed to the fullest, was Godwin himself, which she was in the process of improving. Thus, evoking an old trope of lyrical poetry, he casts her as the muse of *his* work. In fact, he implies that this is where the *true* Wollstonecraft should be sought. By being attributed the honorary, let us call it spiritual, authorship of the work of her lover, of course, she is courteously denied material or intellectual authorship.

Supported by his sense that they were as one, Godwin arrogated to himself the right of making confessions in Wollstonecraft's name. Surprisingly, as Brenda Ayres notices, since Wollstonecraft's rehabilitation in the 1970s his right to produce what he effectively presents as an autobiography of his wife has seldom been seriously challenged. On the contrary, *Memoirs* came to be regarded as the "gospel truth about her" (*Betwixt* 16).

Pamela Clemit's and Gina Luria Walker's introduction to a recent edition of *Memoirs* is paradigmatic of the modern assessment of both Wollstonecraft's figure and Godwin's biography of her. According to them "the *Memoirs* was a work of unprecedented biographical frankness. It included candid discussion of every phase of Wollstonecraft's unconventional career (...) From Godwin's point of view, such directness was an attempt to enact in the public sphere the revolutionary doctrine of sincerity he had advocated in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*" (Clemit and Walker, Introduction 11). They further argue that Godwin had used "Rousseau's writings," particularly the autobiographical *Confessions* and *Reveries du Promeneur Solitaire*, his interest in which they attribute to Wollstonecraft's influence, "as a means of shaping 'individual history'" in *Memoirs*:

In order to restore a harmonious relationship with the physical and social world, he [Godwin] argues, the thinker of good faith must first look for it within himself. By exploring the depths of his own being, the individual will discover not only his own nature, and how it has been distorted by social circumstances, but also the nature of man himself. In this way, self-analysis forms a way of rethinking social and political relations. Yet, Godwin's construction of Wollstonecraft's revolutionary consciousness forms an advance on Rousseau's thought, since it demonstrates the inseparability of individual and social experience in a woman's life, as well as in a man's.

(20)

Clemit and Walker thus slide insensibly into an equiparation of *Memoirs* to Rousseau's *Les Confessions*, thereby effectively granting Godwin's writing about his wife the authority of an autobiography. They imply that he had the same kind of intimate inside knowledge of Wollstonecraft that he had of himself, and, indeed, that he knew her better than she knew herself. Strictly speaking, however, Godwin's is an unauthorised biography—for he does not produce any documental evidence of her conversion to *his* values—, but he presents it notwithstanding as

spiritually closer to the true character of his wife than anything she had written. This is of course highly problematic.

The whole point of Rousseau's confessing was to present the world with a candid expression of the way he intimately viewed himself, as opposed to the way he would like others to perceive him; this he called "une enterprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple et dont l'exécution n'aura point d'imitateur" (*Confessions* 3). What makes such a venture so difficult, apart from strictly epistemological considerations, is that in order to succeed one must overcome both shame and pride. In other words, if the reader will permit me the anachronism, the greatest obstacle to writing such a book is one's ego. *Memoirs*, however, from this point of view, is very different from *Les Confessions*. The author's ego is not exposed in any significant way by his act of "confessing" another's faults. On the contrary, by being "sincere" about Wollstonecraft, Godwin actually promotes his own ego at her expense. In fact, one might say that *Memoirs* is distinctly pre-Rousseauian, in the sense that the writer seems at times not to realise he had what we refer by the word ego. Godwin's contemporaries were acutely aware of this fact.

Robert Southey expressed indignation in a 1804 letter to William Taylor, where he criticises Godwin for what he calls his "want of all feeling in stripping his dead wife naked as he did, & such a wife – & taking such another home when the picture of <that first> hung over his fireplace, – indeed," he added, "my flesh is not made of such Quaker fibre, nor my blood of such toad temperature as not to be irritated by these recollections." What Southey found repulsive about the book, then, was precisely the misplaced "candour" of Godwin's *Memoirs*, and the fact of his having later married a woman that he thought was all that Wollstonecraft was not, both of which constitute, in his view, a betrayal of her memory.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> History has not been kind to Mary Jane Clairmont, who became Godwin's second wife. In 1913, Henry Noel Brailsford expressed much the same opinion in his *Shelley, Godwin, and their Circle*: "Mrs. Clairmont was a strange successor to Mary Wollstonecraft. She was a vulgar and wordly woman, thoroughly feminine, and rather inclined to boast of her total ignorance of philosophy" (169). Thus, she was perceived as being exactly the opposite of her predecessor.

Clemit and Walker, on the other hand, accept Godwin's "sincerity" as both morally and intellectually virtuous. His "belief in the duty of truth-telling," they write, "was based on the Dissenting principle of 'candour,' which might best be described as the disposition to form impartial judgements in all affairs" (Clemit and Walker, Introduction 14). Thus, Clemit and Walker praise Godwin for the full disclosure of *his wife's* personal life as an exercise in candor, suggesting he cast aside all selfish considerations for a higher political end. I must confess I cannot accompany this line of argument. I recognise the virtue of exhibiting one's own foibles; but what is the merit of exhibiting one's wife's defects, especially when that wife was also a rival? Paradoxically, they present him at the same time as a disinterested party and as someone who is emotionally involved with his subject. In other words, they implicitly credit Godwin with having achieved that elusive "synthesis of reason and sympathy for which he was searching" (16). According to them, indeed, "he was in part" initially "attracted to Wollstonecraft because he thought her *Letters* "exemplified" that synthesis (16). This, however, appears to be wringing a meaning out of Godwin's words that they can never support. For he stresses the point that "reason" is intrinsically male in a way that makes it perfectly clear that such a "synthesis" could only be achieved by a man and, in fact, never so much as hints that *Letters* had anything to do with reason. Wollstonecraft was too "feminine" to be reasonable, he implies. He does, however, credit himself with having achieved said "synthesis," in "fulfilment of the lessons he had learned from Wollstonecraft," as Clemit and Walker, following Godwin's suggestion, put it (24).

Thus, he indirectly validates the view expressed by the myth of the "rib:" by absorbing, as it were, Wollstonecraft, he had become a total man, adding her feeling to his reason. And this allows him to make a moral unit of him and Wollstonecraft. This too is in unison with Rousseau's views on the subject: "La relation sociale des sexes est admirable. De cette société résulte une personne morale dont la femme est l'oeil et l'homme le bras, mais avec telle dépendance l'une de l'autre, que



c'est de l'homme que la femme apprend ce qu'il faut voir, et de la femme que l'homme apprend ce qu'il faut faire" (*Émile* 472-73).

Clemit and Walker's reading is useful because it faithfully interprets the tendency of Godwin's recasting of Wollstonecraft's figure. This faithfulness, however, highlights the paradoxical nature of his arguments as well as the way in which they contradict Wollstonecraft's recorded opinions. This peculiarity of their interpretation is equally noticeable in their praise for the structure of Godwin's narrative. He was, they tell us,

concerned with the formation of Wollstonecraft's identity as a woman intellectual, and this involves the organization of her life into a coherent structure. Adopting the structural principle of the *Confessions*, Godwin depicts Wollstonecraft's history as a series of 'revolutions' or turning-points which threaten to alienate her from society, but in fact lead to a growth in moral and political awareness. (Clemit and Walker, 21)

All these "crises" correspond to events in Wollstonecraft's personal and sentimental life. Godwin claims that, despite her misfortunes, she retained a "'generous confidence'"—this is Godwin's expression—that proved her spiritual stamina (*Memoirs* 105).<sup>160</sup> This "confidence," according to Clemit and Walker, "not only provides the key to Wollstonecraft's own improvement, but also makes her an agent of change in others, including himself" (Introduction 22).

Again, Godwin's contemporaries were far less enthusiastic. One of the first published reviews of Godwin's book, which appeared in a publication of which Wollstonecraft herself had been a regular collaborator, *The Analytical Review*, argued that Godwin had not written an intellectual biography at all. Since Wollstonecraft's opinions would inevitably attract criticism, said the *Analytical*,

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<sup>160</sup> The sentence in which this phrase occurs is a good illustration of Godwin's sentimental approach to Wollstonecraft: "Mary rested her head upon the shoulder of her lover, hoping to find a heart with which she might safely treasure her world of affection; fearing to commit a mistake, yet, in spite of her melancholy experience, fraught with that generous confidence, which, in a great soul, is never extinguished" (Godwin, *Memoirs* 105).

we think it was due to Mrs. G. [that is, Godwin owed it to Wollstonecraft], to have stated *how* those opinions were formed, and the *reasons* by which she supported them.

It is indeed a bald narrative of the life of a woman, very eventful and touching. We think it entitled to very limited praise. In another respect it is deficient. It gives us no correct history of the formation of Mrs. G.'s mind. We are neither informed of her favourite books, her hours of study, nor her attainments in languages and philosophy. She contemplated nature with rapture, we are told, and enjoyed much of it's inspiration. Of this there can be no doubt; but (...) we think too little is told us concerning the subjects of Mrs. G.'s study, and her manner of studying.

(Rev. of *Memoirs* [*Analytical Review*] 169)

The *Analytical* wholly rejected, therefore, the complete sentimentalisation of Wollstonecraft carried out by Godwin. She should have been allowed to justify her actions in her own words; instead, he chose to make revelations about her life that would inevitably destroy her reputation, barely mentioning her critique of the moral codes she had broken. The anonymous author of the review further points out that he did not portray her as a working intellectual, but rather as an idealised picture of a sentimental, inspired seer. Indeed, the review anticipates that this portrait of Wollstonecraft will result in the complete dismissal of Wollstonecraft as an intellectual before her arguments are even considered, thus preventing the rational debate she was trying to prompt. Evidently, the *Analytical* was not persuaded by Godwin's claim that Wollstonecraft had suffered a conversion to domesticity and the religion of sensibility. If Wollstonecraft had changed her mind as completely as Godwin suggests she did in the last years of her life, news of this would certainly have reached the *Analytical*, but we find no evidence of this in the review.

Equally decisive is the fact that the *Analytical* could accurately predict the three aspects of Wollstonecraft's conduct that would be met by strong criticism before such criticism had been

voiced: “We conceive exceptions will be taken to her conduct in three respects; and we think too little attention is given to such probable exceptions in the narrative” (Rev. of *Memoirs* [*Analytical Review*] 169). These were, firstly, her having dispensed with the “public ceremony of marriage;” secondly the “versatility of her attachments,” or in other words, what would be perceived as her promiscuity; and finally, the “attempts to destroy herself, when she had a child deserted by its father” (170-172). By qualifying the “exceptions” as “probable,” the reviewer suggests that Godwin could not possibly have ignored the scandal his book would originate. The review, incidentally, although cautiously detaching itself from Wollstonecraft, attempts precisely to justify, or vindicate her in her own terms—which is what one would expect from Godwin’s title. Considering that the reviewer accuses Godwin of telling the public nothing about Wollstonecraft’s intellectual life, the closing sentence is bitterly ironic: “Imperfect as these memoirs are, we have no fellowship with him, who can read them without a tear” (172). That is precisely the problem. Instead of the feminist intellectual she had been, Godwin presents the public with a conventionally pathetic image of Wollstonecraft as a woman consumed by her exquisite sensibility. The *Analytical*, then, seems to regard *Memoirs* as a wasted opportunity for promoting female intellectuality. Incidentally, the irony here appears to have been completely lost on Clemit and Walker: “The reviewer deplored Godwin’s self-referential interpretations, concluding that too great detail was given about Wollstonecraft’s premature death, but adding, ‘Mr. G’s feelings on the occasion do him credit, and it is impossible not to feel with him’” (“Introduction” 33 emphasis mine).

Clemit and Walker’s introduction to *Memoirs*, as I have already stated, is perfectly typical of the common modern assessment of the book. Indeed, most modern biographies of Wollstonecraft have taken for granted her conversion to the ideology of sensibility. “For Wollstonecraft, in Barbara Taylor’s words, ‘the cost of womanhood was high—but high also the price of refusing it. Too high for Wollstonecraft herself, who could no more deny her sensuality than repress her intellect—yet the dilemma which she posed loses none of its significance through her own inability to resolve it’”

(Clemit and Walker, "Introduction" 28). Godwin thought that the rationalism of the *Vindications* was a denial of Wollstonecraft's true feminine nature; Taylor evidently agrees. And so does Janet Todd, according to whose biography of Wollstonecraft the planned second volume of *Vindication* "would concern the *wrongs* of woman and accept that women could not simply be inserted into the male Enlightenment Enterprise, as the earlier book implied. Feminine feeling was destructive in the world as it was, but might also be beneficial, and the choice between reason and sensibility once presented to women was simply too stark, as the letters to Imlay indicated" (*Mary Wollstonecraft* 383).

In order to understand such statements, one must first trace to its roots the unlikely alliance between Godwin and these critics, which may seem paradoxical to those unacquainted with the history of feminism. Godwin thought that reason was masculine, and sensibility feminine, and in this respect his opinion basically coincided with the most widely received ideas of his time and, particularly, with the authors Wollstonecraft attacked in *A Vindication*. An important faction within modern feminism thinking agrees with Godwin on that point.

Modern feminism has mostly emphasised the specificity of the female mind and, for this reason, has had an ambivalent relationship with Wollstonecraft, to put it mildly. In "Mary Does, Alice Doesn't: The Paradox of Female Reason in and for Feminist Theory," Joan B. Landes accurately identifies the causes of this estrangement. "While protesting against the double standard in moral theory," she writes,

Wollstonecraft participates in the very same project of 'remasculinization' of virtue—allowing for a gendered redistribution of virtue (...).

Finding paradoxes in Wollstonecraft's and so many versions of liberal feminism, today's feminist philosophers of difference defend the specificity of the embodied, female subject as a 'theoretical, libidinal, ethical and political agent.' Likewise, in place of Wollstonecraft's faith in reason, feminists of a post-modernist

persuasion cast suspicion on the concept of human subject as a conscious, rational or self-transparent entity. Many would even link abstract reason to masculine forms of violence. In this atmosphere, Mary seems hopelessly trapped by the antinomies of a modern consciousness—not an agent, but a victim of modernity’s ruses (...).

(Landes, “Mary Does” 55)

Wollstonecraft represents what came to be known as “liberal feminism,” and which could perhaps more accurately be described as feminist rationalism. The view that Wollstonecraft aimed at a “remasculinisation” of virtue, however, attributes to her the very assumption she had rejected: that reason, hence virtue, were fundamentally and exclusively male. I think Wollstonecraft’s struggle has a specific historical context that such views fail to consider. She lived in an age when a “woman thinker” was considered by most to be a contradiction in terms. Inasmuch as she established, by her work and example, the falsity of this idea, Wollstonecraft paved the way for the feminist thinker of our day. Besides, an argument could be made that, despite the emphasis she placed on reason, she also did recognise the fundamental specificity of the “embodied” female. In any event, the idea that she had denied its specificity, entails the identification of “sensibility” with femaleness—which Wollstonecraft also denied.

Generally speaking, the common modern reading of Wollstonecraft builds on the very ideas she most emphatically denied. In the terms of her theory the idea of “remasculinising” reason and virtue is simply nonsensical. For Wollstonecraft “feminine sensibility” and “masculine reason” were absurd expressions—incidentally, as absurd as the other possible combinations of the terms, “masculine sensibility” and “feminine reason.” Thus, although, to modern ears, accustomed to the rhetoric of difference, this may seem reactionary, in her time it made perfect sense. She did not think that a woman denied her womanhood by studying philosophy, or by being a rationalist for that matter, any more than she thought a man was emasculated when he betrayed emotion.

In *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft assumed a position that is simultaneously feminist and rationalist. Because she shares Godwin's belief that reason is male, Janet Todd, for example, thinks the two were intrinsically incompatible, and therefore concludes that the "early" Wollstonecraft—that is, Wollstonecraft before her supposed conversion—believed "that the sexual difference should be abolished" (351). But by "reason" Todd and Wollstonecraft mean two very different things. For the former, the term denotes a patriarchal cultural construction; for the latter it meant the ability to form autonomous opinions and justify them. Todd's phrase, incidentally, echoes a sentence of Wollstonecraft, but in a way that I think is misleading:

A wild wish has just flown from my heart to my head, and I will not stifle it though it may excite a horse-laugh. - I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society, unless where love animates the behavior. For this distinction is, I am firmly persuaded, the foundation of the weakness of character ascribed to woman; is the cause why the understanding is neglected, whilst accomplishments are acquired with sedulous care: and the same cause accounts for their preferring the graceful before the heroic virtues. (*Vindication* 126)

Thus, Wollstonecraft did not advocate the "abolishment" of all sexual difference, nor did she think this was possible. The way in which she qualifies her statement is decisive. She would have done away with what she regarded as the unnatural distinctions created by a system of education that did not develop the understanding of women. What she meant, of course, was that she wished women would cease to be regarded as inferior beings, and that the accusation of "masculinity" would no longer be hurled at female intellectuals. She nonetheless maintained that there was a difference, but that this pertained only to love, which she conceived strictly as a sexual relationship.

Wollstonecraft appears to me, in fact, remarkably consistent throughout her works. She systematically refused to grant men the exclusive of intellect, or women the exclusive of sensibility. In her terms, both had minds and bodies, hearts and souls. The idea that underlies *Memoirs* and

Rousseau's theory of sexual difference alike is that women "feel" and man "think." Wollstonecraft would agree with Todd that this distinction is too stark. By "reason" and "intellect" she meant the ability to think that she thought was shared by all humans, regardless of their sex. Therefore, while she did not deny sexual difference, she did emphasise, for the purposes of establishing the figure of the female intellectual, the common human ground. While she never said that men and women were exactly alike, then, for reasons that are easy to understand, she insisted that the latter were not intellectually inferior to the former.

Women were intellectually equipped to understand abstract thought. They could even understand the speculations of men like Rousseau, who denied them the use of reason. And they could also produce speculations of their own. Wollstonecraft also believed that a woman who studied, say, natural philosophy or metaphysics autonomously, instead of confining herself to the kind of subaltern "practical" investigation Rousseau prescribed to women, was not "masculine"—that was her point. Yet, slighting all her work on the process, Todd sides with Godwin, to tell us that Wollstonecraft's demands were "masculine."

At her trial for adultery, Maria "wrote a paper, which she expressly desired might be read in court" (Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 130). This paper, in which she pleads her own case, is itself an indictment of the law that did not allow her to represent herself. It is also a vindication of the rights of woman in general, and a critique of the practical legal indissolubility of the marriage bond in particular, in which Wollstonecraft recaps, for the most part, the arguments she had first advanced in 1792 in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Alluding to her marriage, the defendant begins by declaring to the court that she had "submitted to the rigid laws which enslave women," and continues as follows:

The whole point of the argument of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is to show that rationalism—as the author understood it—and feminism are not incompatible. Wollstonecraft did not recognise, therefore, the dilemma mentioned by Barbara Taylor, and there is no evidence but

Godwin's word to indicate that she ever changed her mind about that. In my opinion, the apparent agreement between Godwin's image of the latter-day Wollstonecraft and the discourse of most modern feminism, on the one hand, and the tension between that discourse and Wollstonecraft's own philosophy on the other, caused critics to overstate the differences between *A Vindication* and her later books. Where many critics have seen a change of mind, indeed, I see nothing but a change of literary genre. Her unfinished novel, *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman*, for example, is often cited—notably by Janet Todd—as reflecting a major shift in her ideas, yet, in the climax of the novel, included in the last chapter of the second volume, Wollstonecraft puts in the mouth of her protagonist exactly the same arguments she had herself developed in *A Vindication*.

I exclaim against the laws which throw the whole weight of the yoke on the weaker shoulders, and force women, when they claim protectorship as mothers, to sign a contract, which renders them dependent on the caprice of the tyrant, whom choice or necessity has appointed to reign over them. Various are the cases, in which a woman ought to separate herself from her husband; and mine, I may be allowed emphatically to insist, comes under the description of the most aggravated.

(Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 130)

Maria also formally refuses to obey the laws that “make women the property of their husbands” (Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 130). Furthermore, she traces the wrongs of woman, illustrated by her story, to a “false morality (...) which makes all the virtue of women consist in chastity, submission, and the forgiveness of injuries” (131). This, of course, is the same argument that had been developed by Wollstonecraft in *propria persona*.

Finally, Maria affirms her sacred right—indeed, her sacred duty—to disobey unjust laws, on the grounds that private conscience takes priority over the rule of law. Woman, she writes, “must be allowed to consult her conscience, and regulate her conduct, in some degree, by her own sense of right. (...) if laws exist, made by the strong to oppress the weak, I appeal to my own sense of



justice” (Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 132). These statements presuppose that women are rational beings, hence fully responsible for their acts. Accordingly, Maria also frees Darnford, the man with whom she had had an adulterous relationship, “from the charge of seduction,” with the argument that he was “the man of my choice” (133). The idea that he had “seduced” her, of course, presupposed that women were not morally responsible for their acts.

But the portion of Maria’s paper where the echoes of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* are more clearly heard is her final solemn address to the jury: “I appeal to the justice and humanity of the jury—a body of men, whose private judgment must be allowed to modify laws, that must be unjust, because definite rules can never apply to indefinite circumstances” (Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 133). Thus, the appeal for the rights of woman becomes a challenge to patriarchy, or more precisely, the form the argument takes presupposes the rule of patriarchy, making it the object of explicit problematisation. Women are allowed no voice in the legal system—men always decide for them. Much like Wollstonecraft had done in *A Vindication*, Maria exhibits her rationality in order to demonstrate the fundamental injustice of the rule of man. By oppressing women, men, who are in a position of power, betray the common humanity of both.

Significantly, in his reply, the judge completely ignores Maria’s arguments:

The judge, in summing up the evidence, alluded to ‘the fallacy of letting women plead their feelings, as an excuse for the violation of the marriage-vow. (...) We did not want French principles in public or private life—and, if women were allowed to plead their feelings, as an excuse or palliation of infidelity, it was opening a flood-gate for immorality. What virtuous woman thought of her feelings? — It was her duty to love and obey the man chosen by her parents and relations, who were qualified by their experience to judge better for her, than she could herself.’

(Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 133)

Maria, of course, did not plead her “feelings,” as the judge here suggests. His pre-established, hence unassailable conviction that women are not capable of reason, determines his refusal to engage in rational debate with her. The question was settled beforehand. Man thinks; woman feels. Therefore, whenever a woman argues a case, she must be pleading her feelings. This is what may accurately be described as implicit bias. Evidently, Wollstonecraft projected on this scene her own frustration at being dismissed from philosophical debates with similar pretexts. Indeed, I find no evidence of a change of heart in this scene, written within days of her death. On the other hand, it is shocking to realise how Godwin dismissed Wollstonecraft’s arguments with almost the same arguments the judge here employs. Yet, at the same time, he himself published the unfinished manuscript of *Wrongs of Woman*: how could he not have realised how thoroughly it contradicted his claims? I can only conclude that he was afflicted by the same peculiar blindness of the judge, and that this prevented him from seeing nothing but “feeling” in a text written by a woman.

As for *Letters Written During a Short Residency in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, Todd, echoing Godwin’s narrative, writes that: “In her earlier books, whatever their tenor, Wollstonecraft had stressed intellectual merit; in this new one [*Letters from Norway*], she would openly declare herself the heroine and insist on the value of the personal—she would allow ‘feeling to be my criteria’ and her remarks and reflections would flow ‘unrestrained’” (*Memoirs* 367 emphasis mine). The idea that personal involvement is incompatible with “intellectual merit,” however, is totally alien to Wollstonecraft’s thought. Besides, even in *Letters*, there is nothing to indicate that she saw a contradiction, or even a tension between intellect and womanhood; or between sensibility and maleness, for that matter.

Wollstonecraft’s meditations on nature in that book have often been cited as evidence of her supposed conversion to the ideology of sensibility, but this idea too can ultimately be traced to Godwin, who, as we have seen, stated that Wollstonecraft’s religion and philosophy “were (...) the

pure result of feeling and taste” (*Memoirs* 121). This is, again, in direct opposition to *A Vindication*, where she had written “I consider religion in a light opposite to that recommended by Dr Gregory, who treats it as a matter of sentiment and taste” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 115). She advocated, instead, a “rational religion,” which consisted in “submission to the will of a being so perfectly wise, that all his wills must be directed by the proper motive—must be reasonable” (255). Yet, whenever a contradiction arises between Wollstonecraft’s statements and Godwin’s, it has long since become customary to take his word against hers.

Todd, for example, as we have seen, thought *Letters* marked Wollstonecraft’s acceptance of female specificity, despite the fact that her meditations on the sublime being evidently inspired, precisely, by male writers like Rousseau and Burke. In reality, Wollstonecraft’s interest in spectacles of natural grandeur in no way contradicts the thoughts she had articulated in *A Vindication*—the *Analytical*, incidentally, clearly did not see any contradiction there, quite the opposite; it suggested Godwin had placed disproportionate emphasis on that aspect of her intellectual life. Wollstonecraft’s strategy was not to question the idea of rationality, but rather appropriating male discourses to challenge the idea that they were specifically male and could not be understood by women.

Here is perhaps the most notable of the “sublime” descriptions contained in *Letters Written During a Short Residence*:

The pine and fir woods, left entirely to nature, display an endless variety; and the paths in the wood are not entangled with fallen leaves, which are only interesting whilst they are fluttering between life and death. The grey cobweb-like appearance of the aged pines is a much finer image of decay; the fibres whitening as they lose their moisture, imprisoned life seems to be stealing away. I cannot tell why—but death, under every form, appears to me like something getting free—to expand in I know

not what element; nay, I feel that this conscious being must be as unfettered, have the wings of thought, before it can be happy. (Wollstonecraft 88-89)

Then, encountering a cataract—one of the typical embodiments of the sublime—, she sees it as a symbol of the constant flow of consciousness. The thoughts the contemplation of this spectacle inspire are, for Wollstonecraft, both a foreshadowing and a proof of the immortality of the thinking being:

the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited were pleasurable; and, viewing it, my soul rose, with renewed dignity, above its cares—grasping at immortality—it seemed as impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me—I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come. (Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written* 89)

The waterfall, although being constantly in flux, retains its identity. Looking at it, the mind of the beholder is turned on itself, and through the analogy between consciousness and the waterfall, projects itself on eternity. Despite the mystical undertones of this discourse, one must not forget that Wollstonecraft is in fact presenting herself emphatically as a thinking being, thus proving, in the terms of *A Vindication*, that women are rational, hence immortal beings: “the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for can the soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason?” (122).

Thus, contrary to Godwin’s claims, Wollstonecraft regarded true religion as emanating from reason—her religious outlook may be termed rationalist deism. Her experiments with the sublime in *Letters*, in fact, entail the mixture of reason and sensibility she had always advocated. For, in *A Vindication*, she had not expressed a desire to abolish sensibility—any more than she expressed a desire to abolish sexual difference—; to be more precise, she never denied the delight derivable from sensuous impressions. She thought the mind—meaning reason—was expanded by the

experience of the sublime. The way she conceived of this experience embodied her idea that reason and sensibility were not opposing, mutually exclusive principles, but rather complementary, inseparable aspects of the individual mind.

Indeed, as we have seen, Wollstonecraft thought that the social and political reform she envisaged required a revision of language. For her, certain words were commonly used in a false sense that reflected a mistaken and perverse understanding of gender, and therefore should be restored to their true, natural sense. “Sensibility” was one such word. In the common acceptance, which she regarded as unnatural, it denoted an attitude that promoted feeling at the expense of thinking. What was vulgarly termed “sensibility,” then, she regarded as the absence of habits of reflection—such as she applied to sublime spectacles like the cataract. She did wish to abolish, therefore, the system of education that created what she regarded as an exclusive subjection to the senses. Women were trained to please men, and, as this required them not to reason, they were in effect led to think of themselves as bodies without minds or souls: “Surely she has not an immortal soul who can loiter life away merely employed to adorn her person, that she may (...) soften the cares of a fellow-creature who is willing to be enlivened by her smiles and tricks, when the serious business of life is over” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 98). This kind of “feminine” sensibility, then, was suited only for a “little soul that cannot extend its views beyond the present minute division of existence” (100). Her description of the experience of the sublime, on the other hand, inasmuch as it embodied what she regarded as the proper understanding of sensibility, was also a statement of her basic assumption that women are rational. Therefore, such descriptions can in no way be construed as evidence that she had finally embraced “female” sensibility. The “sensibility” Wollstonecraft embraced—which she had always embraced—is not feminine, but common to all human beings.

In *Letters*, therefore, Wollstonecraft carried on the project of *A Vindication* by showing to the reader that she was not a “little soul,” and was able to “grasp at immortality” as well as male reasoners like Rousseau and Burke. Thus, in *Letters* she continues to pursue an aggressive program

of gender-bending which was designed to show that “the sexual distinction which men have so warmly insisted upon, is arbitrary” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 265). Therefore, Wollstonecraft was not trying to abolish sexual difference, as Todd suggested, but only this “arbitrary distinction,” which, it is implied, should be replaced with a more natural one.

Modern feminism, as we have seen, has mostly looked upon her project in the light of a “remasculinisation” of reason. For Wollstonecraft, however, the project was rather the “demasculinisation,” or “desexualisation” of reason. She did think that most women were irrational and “little souls,” but, in all fairness, she thought most men were equally degraded. She thought, that is, that they too were, by and large, not trained to think autonomously, or to bend their thoughts toward abstract conceptions. Most men thought, or at least felt, women were nothing *but* body, and thus, by enslaving women, they enslaved themselves. Hence, they too were “little souls.”

Wollstonecraft’s emphasis on sameness instead of difference made perfect sense at a time when the very possibility of the woman intellectual was still very much a contested issue. Under that heading, I include the woman scientist, the woman historian, as well as the woman philosopher. This possibility has since become an actuality. We still live in a patriarchal society, I think there can be no doubt of that, but women are now present in all branches of academia and scientific research. This was not the case at all in Wollstonecraft’s time.

She was well aware that she was cutting a picture that confuted the traditional distinction between men and women; or, in other words, that people would perceive her as “masculine.” But she thought that the conceptions of gender from which such judgements flowed were fundamentally flawed and based on irrational myths. This, of course, is recognised, in principle both by Clemit and Walker and Janet Todd, but they think that Godwin and Wollstonecraft, the latter-day Wollstonecraft, that is, shared the same project of revision of the gender relations, the most perfect expression of which would be *Memoirs*, which according to the first of these critics “are designed to stimulate us to make new ‘uses’ of Wollstonecraft through its portrayal of her as an agent of reform,

through its representations of the contested categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ as Godwin and Wollstonecraft tried to rethink them, and through its lyrical evocation of their shared ‘experiment’ in living” (Clemit and Walker , Introduction 36).

Actually, Godwin stimulates us to abuse Wollstonecraft, I think, for his revision of the concepts of “male” and “female” does not coincide with hers—in fact, Godwin’s understanding of gender was as fundamentally reactionary as hers is revolutionary. The modern reception of Wollstonecraft’s work has been a long series of misunderstandings which can ultimately be traced to *Memoirs*, itself a tragic story of misunderstanding. Again, Clemit and Walker’s introduction to the book is a perfect illustration of this. There, they identify Godwin’s anarchist project with Wollstonecraft’s vision of equality between the sexes. The principle of “candour,” they tell us,

was central to Godwin’s theory of anarchism, in which the exercise of rational judgement will lead to individual men and women gradually becoming wiser, until government withers away because it no longer is necessary. As he wrote in a chapter ‘Mode of Effecting Revolutions:’ ‘The revolutions of states (...) consist principally in the change of sentiments and dispositions in the members of those states. The true instruments for changing the opinions of men are argument and persuasion.’”

(Clemit and Walker, Introduction 14).

Thus, they transcribe this passage of the first edition of *Political Justice* as if it were perfectly unproblematic for their theory. They imply, that is, that gender equality had been inherent to Godwin’s vision of a world without government from the beginning, and that this idea also pervaded his assesement of Wollstonecraft’s importance. In reality, this reading evinces an egregious critical blindness.

Wollstonecraft and Godwin did indeed share a belief radical, but peaceful political reform. They believed, that is, in a revolution of mentalities that would bring into existence a society of rational, responsible individuals, who took an equal share in the conduction of the affairs of the

state. I am also certain that Wollstonecraft would agree that the only means to bring about the kind of political change they advocated were “argument and persuasion.” The problem is, in *Memoirs* Godwin explicitly denies Wollstonecraft, and by extension, all women, the ability to argue rationally. Therefore, he denies that she could ever be an active agent of change. He clearly implies that she could only aspire to assist *him* in the task of persuading rational individuals, that is, men, of the need for change. By so doing, of course, he also indirectly denies her the status of full-citizenship in his republic, which was strictly an association of *rational* individuals. In practice, Godwin ascribes to Wollstonecraft the role of muse of *his* revolution, which differed materially from hers in being a revolution of *men*. Through the sentimental rhetoric he develops in *Memoirs*, indeed, and specifically by his identification of woman with beauty, he reiterates this emphatically male political outlook, according to which women could only aspire to ornament, as it were, the world, and create an agreeable domestic environment for men. Whatever our own convictions on this subject may be, it must be recognised that Wollstonecraft violently disagreed, not only with this particularly sentimentalised version of the doctrine of the separate spheres, but with the core ideas that determine it.

Indeed, Godwin reconciled Wollstonecraft precisely with the very notion of “female sensibility” that she found absurd. He makes it very clear that “feeling” was, for Wollstonecraft, a substitute of “thinking,” and this is precisely the sort of “sensibility” she meant to abolish. And then, by equating “feeling” with femaleness, he indicates that this “sensibility” was proper of the female mind, thus recuperating the notion of sexual identity she had rejected.

Through this argument, moreover, he arrogated himself the right to correct her intuitions from a “male” rational perspective. His portrait of her may challenge conventional morality, but it posed no challenge to the traditional notions of sexual difference. Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, placed herself neatly across available gender roles. She expected people would think her “masculine,” but thought the phrase absurd. Inasmuch as it explodes the identification of specific



behaviours with sex, her theory tends toward the idea of gender—incidentally, this is something that cannot be said for Godwin’s theory, which rather reiterates the idea that patriarchy was based on the natural intellectual inferiority of women relative to men. Indeed, the idea of gender, that is, of culturally determined sexual roles or behaviours, could not be conceived until all differences between the sexes ceased to be regarded as natural and necessary, and this is precisely the conceptual change Wollstonecraft promoted, by reducing the natural hypothesis to the absurd. “I have been led to imagine,” she ironically observes, “that the few extraordinary women who have rushed in eccentric directions out of the orbit prescribed to their sex, were *male* spirits, confined by mistake in female frames. But it is not philosophical to think of sex when the soul is mentioned” (*Vindication* 103).

As Poe suggests in his review of *A Drama of Exile*, Mary Wollstonecraft represented a third sex. For, according to the received notions on the subject, she was neither “male” nor “female;” in the common language there was no name for what she was. But then, according to her, the notion associated in the common language with these terms was not true to reality. Wollstonecraft knew that the “vindicator” of the rights of woman would be deemed masculine, but: “It would be just as rational to declare that the courtiers of France,” meaning the aristocracy of the Ancien Régime, “were not men” (*Vindication* 129).

#### 4 - “Friendship melting into Love:” Love and Marriage in Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and Poe

Godwin’s portrait of Wollstonecraft is as idealised as those Poe’s narrators make of Morella and Ligeia. One might say, to use Richard Wilbur’s expression, that he too “Pythagorised” his wife out of this world, by representing her as someone completely alien to earthly concerns. This spiritual nature was reflected, according to Godwin, both on her religious and philosophical opinions, which he claimed were arrived at through a sort of enthusiasm, and on her notions of love. As usual, however, Wollstonecraft’s recorded opinions about conjugality formed the greatest possible contrast with both Godwin’s representation of her ideas and with his own theories on the subject. A similar contrast appears to subsist between what Morella appears to have been saying to her husband, and the construal he places on her words. In both texts, the contrast creates a comical effect, which was clearly unintended by the narrator.

As we have seen, it has been suggested that Wollstonecraft’s “early” rationalism resulted in a wholesale repression of “sensuality,” and that she would later, after her first heterosexual experiments, distance herself from that view: “Wollstonecraft now saw sexual desire as natural and right for women” (Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft* 236). The implication, of course, is that she had, as Godwin claims, changed her mind. According to the same critic, Godwin also was supposed to have realised “how much the strident vindicator had softened” the second time they met (380).

But this is another egregious misrepresentation of Wollstonecraft’s ideas. Although she agreed with Godwin that procreation was the proper end of sex, she had never rejected sensuality. Nor did she contest woman’s right to be loved, as has been suggested. That is a complete inversion of her priorities. She argued, instead, against the idea that women “were made” solely “to be loved,” and therefore “must not aim at respect, lest they should be hunted out of society as masculine” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 103). She argues, therefore, against the idea that an intellectual woman was “unlovable.” She did not preach sexual liberation, of course—how could she, when the first

reliable and widely-available contraceptive methods were more than a century away?—, but neither did she condemn sexual enjoyment—and this was a bold enough view in her time. She remarked that “pleasure is considered” by men “as mere relaxation; while women seek for pleasure as the main purpose of existence,” and thus, “to their senses, are women made slaves” (129). Thus, Wollstonecraft did not reject sensuality, but thought that women were taught to value nothing else. This, then, was what she wished to see changed.

In fact, Godwin was the one repudiating sensual pleasure—he went so far as to deny it. His ideal conception of love was entirely detached from sexuality. “The tendency of a cultivated and virtuous mind is to render us indifferent to the gratification of sense (...). We soon learn to despise the mere animal function (...) We absurdly imagine that no better road can be found [than sex] to the sympathy and intercourse of minds” (*Political Justice* [1985] 871).<sup>161</sup> On his part, then, he thought it highly desirable to abandon sex altogether in favour of a purely intellectual intercourse. Indeed, philosophical men like himself had already lost, he suggests, all interest in sex. Still, the preservation of the species required that they continued to subject themselves to the indignity of copulation—but he believed that was about to change.

His rigidly puritanical stance reaches its climax in a passage of *Political Justice* where he makes an apocalyptic prediction. He thought that the time was nearly at hand when men would finally “cease to propagate, for they will no longer have any motive, either of error or duty, to induce them (...). In addition to this they will probably be immortal. The whole will be a people of men, not of children” (Godwin *Political Justice* [1793] 871). In other words, since the need to replenish the earth would disappear, sex would no longer be a duty for men. Moreover, since immortality will come as the result of perfect wisdom, men will also lose any desire to engage in the debasing practice of sexual intercourse. It is hard to know whether Godwin’s ideal “men” would

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<sup>161</sup> I have used Isaac Kramnick’s edition of *Political Justice*, which follows the third edition, the last overseen by Godwin.

have any use for *women* at all in their sexless earthly paradise, where the reason of the male would have governed unchallenged.

Being an atheist, Godwin projected on the earth and on the not-so-distant future the hope that most rationalist philosophers of his epoch, which were typically deist, placed in the afterlife. Wollstonecraft herself, which in this respect is a more typical representative of the Enlightenment, followed the more common practice, and projected her version of the rationalist utopia of a “world where sensation will give place to reason” on the afterlife, while remarking that male writers had tacitly denied woman a place in this golden future: “How women are to exist in that state where there is to be neither marrying nor giving in marriage, we are not told. For though moralists have agreed that the tenor of life seems to prove that *man* is prepared by various circumstances for a future state, they constantly concur in advising *woman* only to provide for the present” (*Vindication* 94, 102). One could almost fancy she was replying to her husband from the other side of the grave.

On the other hand, Godwin’s denial of the pleasures of sex, which he presents as a terrible ordeal (at least for *men*) or, at best, a drudgery, is a little too extreme, and inevitably makes him look like a hypocrite—especially after his marriage with Wollstonecraft. Indeed, he did not move away from his disparagement of sex when he got together with her; instead he embodied his vision of a bodiless intercourse in his account of his relationship with Wollstonecraft, deploying in the process all the sentimental commonplaces of ideal womanhood. He tells us that Wollstonecraft was as little interested in sensual pleasure—that “mire and grossness,” as he called it—as he was, and that their refined love nearly approximated the ideal sexless purity he had always longed for. Indeed, their love was so refined, he tells us, that it did not require the presence of its object—in fact, it required its absence. For absence “bestows a refined and aërial delicacy upon affection, which it with difficulty acquires in any other way. It seems to resemble the communication of spirits, without the medium, or the impediment, of this earthly frame” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 209n, 104).

In fact, he claims he had fallen in love with Wollstonecraft, he tells us, *in absentia*, when he read *Letters*. The reading of her “lovely” book becomes, in retrospect, the prehistory of their love affair. According to this narrative, then, their sympathy first manifested through that most abstract of relationships, that between a reader and the author of a book—it was, indeed, the “communication of spirits.” Godwin the reader, then, is supposed to have fallen in love with the Wollstonecraft’s innermost self, the “author” of the book he describes as the product of pure female sensibility. Wollstonecraft’s physical appearance, he thereby implies, had nothing to do with his affection, and this made his love remarkably free from the “grossness” of sensual attachments from the beginning. However, Godwin recognises the “spiritual” intercourse quickly became “physical.” Some months after having fallen in love with the author, the philosopher became intimate with the woman. They started visiting each other regularly, and, he avows: “From that time our intimacy increased by regular, almost imperceptible degrees” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 103).

Incidentally, this idea is clearly evoked by a passage in “Ligeia,” to which I have already alluded, where the narrator alleges, as a defence for all the conspicuous gaps in his story, that the rare excellences of his wife “made their way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that they have been unnoticed and unknown” (Poe, “Ligeia” 310). Thus, Poe’s narrator intimates, once again, what Godwin openly admits, namely that it was not a case of love at first sight, and, indeed, that there had been a time when he was not sensitive to his future wife’s very peculiar charms, but was even repulsed by her. Indeed, as we have seen, on first meeting her, Godwin had been very displeased with Wollstonecraft, whom he thought very masculine both in person and in opinions. This was that memorable occasion in which she had criticised the “great man” Burke. Moreover, in both the tales and *Memoirs*, the beginning of the adventure determines the narrator’s embarrassing ignorance of certain key facts about his wife’s life prior to their *liaison*.<sup>162</sup>

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162 Ligeia’s husband cannot remember where he first met his wife. He also cannot remember anything about her family. As he writes, “a recollection flashes upon me that I have never known the paternal name” of the woman he knew only as Ligeia (Poe, “Ligeia” 311).

“Ligeia” and “Morella,” then, appear to depict the same smooth transition from asexual to sexual intercourse expressed by the simile Godwin applied to his own case: “It was friendship melting into love” (*Memoirs* 104). Indeed, the transition appeared so smooth to Poe’s narrators that they seemed not to have realised it, a possibility which Godwin’s rhetoric also lets us envisage:

The partiality we conceived for each other, was in that mode, which I have always regarded as the purest and most refined style of love. [Indeed, Godwin never materially revised his views on love.] It grew with equal advances in the mind of each. It would have been impossible for the most minute observer to have said who was before, and who was after. One sex did not take the priority which long-established custom has awarded it, nor the other overstep that delicacy which is so severely imposed. I am not conscious that either party can assume to have been the agent or the patient, the toil-spreader or the prey, in the affair. When, in the course of things, the disclosure came, there was nothing, in a manner, for either party to disclose to the other.

(*Memoirs*, 103-104).

In the conventional, socially coded game of seduction, woman was *supposed* to break the rules of delicacy, and man to lure her into error. This is here contradistinguished from the “natural” development of affections Godwin illustrates with the “melting” image. He regards as natural only that love which comes unnoticed, without any of the obtrusive lewdness and treachery that he associates with traditional courtship. Hence, the natural “melting” beguiles the “grossness” with which Godwin regarded sexual transactions. For there was sex, he finally admits, when he states his reason for refusing to marry Wollstonecraft at first: “that which (...) is of all things most sacredly

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Likewise, Godwin, although he did not ignore the paternal name of his wife, alluding to the period in which Wollstonecraft had adopted Imlay’s name, tells us that “the name she bore” was “perfectly immaterial,” and referred to her as “Mary” throughout his book (*Memoirs* 108). And, as the *Monthly Review* maliciously observed: “Where she was born, her husband does not know” (180).

private, to blow a trumpet before it, and to record the moment when it has arrived at its climax,” was ridiculous, he thought (Godwin, *Memoirs* 105).

This is perhaps the only point on which Godwin’s ideas on sex differ materially from those of Rousseau: “Dans l’union des sexes chacun concourt également à l’objet commun, mais non pas de la même manière. De cette diversité naît la première différence assignable entre les rapports moraux de l’un et de l’autre. L’un doit être actif et fort, l’autre passive et faible: il faut nécessairement que l’un veuille et puisse, il suffit que l’autre résiste peu” (*Émile* 446). Nevertheless, Godwin’s rejection of the marriage institution is still very much based on a typical sentimental view of love, from which eroticism is entirely absent. For him, love and friendship are manifestations of the same refined spiritual affection. In fact, he implies that both tend, by their very nature, to spiritualisation. Godwin gives us to understand that his fleshless love should never be confused with that despicable lust that usurps its name among the unphilosophical. His “male” mind was attracted to Wollstonecraft’s “female” mind, and vice-versa; sex sort of just happened.

We have no way of knowing whether Wollstonecraft would have subscribed Godwin’s understanding of love by the end of her life, or corroborated his version of their story, but she left enough written on the subject to warrant an educated guess. The presupposition that the experiment in cohabitation with Godwin was the result of a common political agenda has obscured the indisputable fact that the phrase “friendship melting into love” would have made absolutely no sense for the author of *A Vindication*.” Wollstonecraft was categorical: “love and friendship cannot subsist in the same bosom; (...) for the same object, [they] can only be felt in succession,” and in that order (*Vindication* 142).

For Wollstonecraft, the word “love” should only be employed in its strictest technical sense, to denote an appetite, or passion. Love was “the common passion, in which chance and sensation take place of choice and reason,” and “is, in some degree, felt by the mass of mankind;” she also called it a “fever” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 99). Thus, she makes it very clear that love was, by

definition, the suspension of rationality, and therefore could never be confused with friendship, a word which she appropriated to strictly intellectual affections. Although she highly valued continence—and not precisely chastity—, Wollstonecraft nonetheless recognised sexual appetite was natural for both sexes: “Women as well as men ought to have the common appetites and passions of their nature, they are only brutal when unchecked by reason” (*Vindication* 200). This sentence, which is taken from *A Vindication*, incidentally, clearly belies Todd’s claim that Wollstonecraft had, before her involvement with Imlay, denied that sexual desire was “natural and right for women” (*Mary Wollstonecraft* 236). On the contrary, Wollstonecraft had always refused the sentimental view that took, as it were, sex out of love.

The first stage of any union between a man and a woman, the ultimate purpose of which must be (on this point she is perfectly explicit) the begetting and raising of children, was necessarily love, which Wollstonecraft conceived, without any sentimentality, as sexual desire. As she saw it, this stage could never be bypassed. And this created the main problem which *A Vindication* attempts to address. Wollstonecraft’s was basically a bourgeois conception of conjugality, reviewed to accommodate the rights of women. “Females” were generally “denied all political privileges, and not allowed, as married women, excepting in criminal cases, a civil existence” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 256). Wollstonecraft thought that both parents should be involved in the education of their children, though in different ways, and advocated monogamy, though not at all cost, as the best way to ensure this collaboration. But the lasting relationship she envisaged could never be based on love, which she regarded as a self-limiting emotion. Such a collaboration would not be possible until sexual relationships were established on an equalitarian basis.

“Love, considered as an animal appetite,” and as such Wollstonecraft thought it should always be regarded, “cannot long feed on itself without expiring. And this extinction in its own flame, may be termed the violent death of love” (*Vindication* 141). “Love, from its very nature,” its sexual nature, that is, “must be transitory. To seek for a secret that would render it constant, would



be as wild a search as for the philosopher's stone, or the grand panacea: and the discovery would be equally useless, or rather pernicious, to mankind" (98).

The fire image expresses in Wollstonecraft the idea of the self-consuming nature of desire, which is explicitly contrasted with friendship, conceived as a permanent attachment based on mutual respect. Godwin's idea of "friendship melting into love" is, therefore, wholly incompatible with her conception of matrimonial relationships. "This is, must be, the course of nature—friendship or indifference inevitably succeeds love" (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 99).

It was neither possible nor desirable, she thought, to struggle against the course of Nature by attempting artificially to keep the "flame" alive, to use her own metaphor. Friendship was the only possible foundation of a lasting relationship, and, since it was incompatible with desire, "a master and mistress of a family ought not to continue to love each other with a passion" (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 99). The relationship that had been first established on love, then, should gradually become the association of two responsible individuals for the purpose of raising a family. This did not mean, however, that the sexual appetite was altogether extinguished, only that the couple kept it under check—especially, thought Wollstonecraft, the man. Maternity marks the term of the "fiery" stage of marriage, and the beginning of a new stage, but only if the man was rational enough to exercise some self-restraint, which was not very probable at a time when people of both sexes were being educated, as she thought, to only value the gratification of their senses.

This disenchanted but realistic take on sexuality is nothing like Godwin's apocalyptic vision of a world without sex. Unlike him, Wollstonecraft was of the opinion that human beings could not behave "rationally" all the time. She openly acknowledged the role of sexual desire and sensual fruition in conjugality that Godwin did his best to sweep them under the rug. He thought that there was nothing pleasant or sacred about sex, and that it was rather dirty and undignified, and therefore the sooner man got over it the better. Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, having a broader

understanding of human nature, thought this was neither viable nor desirable. Her take on sexuality may sound rather bleak to modern ears, but nowhere as bleak as Godwin's:

Love, such as the exalted pen of genius has traced, exists not on earth, or only resides in those exalted, fervid imaginations that have sketched such dangerous pictures. Dangerous, because they not only afford a plausible excuse to the voluptuary who disguises sheer sensuality under a sentimental veil, but as they spread affectation, and take from the dignity of virtue. (...) Virtue and pleasure are not, in fact, so nearly allied in this life as some eloquent writers have laboured to prove.

(Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 142).

Yet, Godwin's sentimental notion of the coexistence of friendship and love, as well as his ideal picture of a love that resembled "the communication of spirits," implies precisely this alliance between virtue and pleasure. On her part, Wollstonecraft, so far from rejecting pleasure, actually affirmed it against what she termed "metaphysical notions respecting that passion" (*Vindication* 255). Godwin's conception of love, on the other hand, could hardly be any more "metaphysical," and in this respect it strongly resembles that of the narrator of "Morella," who is a little more extreme in his rejection of the "physical," and a little more consistent—but not much. Not content with disparaging sexual activity, the latter actually denies categorically—or appears to deny—that he had had sexual intercourse with his wife, thereby making its otherwise unremarkable consequence, pregnancy, appear as an unprecedented wonder—a downright miracle. His marriage was not a real marriage, he insists; the omission of sexual intercourse made it a mere formality. He has to insist, lest the reader get the wrong idea from his wife's pregnancy: "my soul, from our first meeting, burned with fires it had not before known; but the fires were not of Eros, and bitter and tormenting to my spirit was the gradual conviction that I could in no manner define their unusual meaning, or regulate their vague intensity. Yet we met; and fate bound us together at the altar; and I never spoke of passion, nor thought of love" (Poe, "Morella" 229).

I honestly cannot understand how anyone could have taken a narrator seriously whose reasoning is based on a premise so obviously contradicted by subsequent events. But this is no more than the *reductio ab absurdum* of Godwin's rhetoric: he too claimed that his marriage with Wollstonecraft was not *really* a marriage, but a revolutionary experiment in cohabitation, based on so ostensibly spiritualised an affection that, were not for his wife's pregnancy, we would no doubt surmise that the couple had completely got over sex, in anticipation of Godwin's prediction that "man" would, sooner rather than later, "cease to propagate."

Morella and her husband, judging from the latter's testimony, spent the first period of their marriage studying together. He claims that the unravelling of the mysteries of personal identity was all they cared about—at least, that seems to be the idea, for his discourse is as vague and full of innuendo as that of his fellow-narrator in "Ligeia," and this makes it very difficult to know for certain what was going on exactly. Whatever it was, after some time, the narrator alleges a strange change came over his "friend" which rendered her repulsive to him. After this change, they no longer studied—or whatever it was that they were doing—together. This is the second mystery of "Morella," which the narrator felt was somehow obscurely connected with the first, the "nature" of his affection for her.

At this point in the narrative, a pregnancy was the last thing the reader would expect. Convinced that the "fires were not of Eros," the thought seems never to have crossed the narrator's head either, until, on the last night of her life, Morella herself told him she was about to give birth to a child—*his* child. It should have appeared obvious to him then that he had been sorely mistaken about the "nature" of the "fires;" that they were "of Eros" after all. Yet, even then, he remains apparently convinced that he and Morella had never engaged in sexual intercourse.

The narrator's negative "*not* of Eros," however, implies his recognition that his story does look trivial. He appears perfectly aware that the burden of proof is on his side. His story is presumably one of those unbelievable truths that Poe's narrators so often try to palm on

unsuspecting readers. But this is where his problems start in earnest. His authority is corroded from the outset by doubt. He had “never before known” “fires” such as those in which he burned for Morella; he does not recognise them. But if he does not know their “nature,” how can he be so certain that they were “not of Eros;” how can he positively assert they had nothing to do with her pregnancy? Everything, from that “backward” reasoning that proceeds from effects to their *habitual* causes, to the narrator’s blunders, corroborates the impression that he was wrong, that is, that he did not know what “Eros” meant, and therefore was not competent to judge whether what he felt was *it*. His claim that this were “fires” such as he had “never before known,” then, becomes a clear indication of sexual inexperience. This is corroborated by Morella’s own testimony, for she clearly reproaches him for his ignorance of sexual matters. He, of course, cannot for the life of him understand what she was telling him just before she died, but, considering how obvious her allusions are, this fact, in itself, confirms his ignorance.

On the night she died, Morella called her husband to her side to make the following announcement: “I am dying, yet shall I live,” to which he replies “Morella!” (Poe, “Morella” 232). This expletive indicates bafflement. Even this late in the story, when Morella was about to give birth to their child, and therefore must have been noticeably pregnant, the narrator proves himself incapable to guess the solution to this riddle without her help. She was dying, yet would live on. What in the world *could* Morella mean?

She spells it out for him, and proceeds to curse the exasperating, clueless father by parables:

“The days have never been when thou couldst love me—but her whom in life thou didst abhor, in death thou shalt adore.”

“Morella!”

“I repeat that I am dying. But within me is a pledge of that affection—ah, how little! —which thou didst feel for me, Morella. And when my spirit departs shall the child live—thy child and mine, Morella’s. But thy days shall be days of sorrow—

that sorrow which is the most lasting of impressions, as the cypress is the most enduring of trees. For the hours of thy happiness are over; and joy is not gathered twice in a life, as the roses of Paestum twice in a year. Thou shalt no longer, then, play the Teian with time, but, being ignorant of the myrtle and the vine, thou shalt bear about with thee thy shroud on earth, as do the Moslemin at Mecca.

(Poe, "Morella" 232-33)

This is certainly an ornate tirade, but with it Morella actually specifies the meaning of her previous statement. She was dying, but also pregnant, therefore, would live on in her child. In addition, she was not pleased with her husband, whom she reproaches for his lack of "affection." This, of course, chimes with his own claim that the fires had not been "of Eros." Morella, however, clearly states that her child was a "pledge" of *what little* affection he had showed for her.

The only extraordinary thing about this exchange, I think, is the narrator's seeming inability to understand it. Indeed, he remains as stupefied as ever: "Morella! (...) Morella! how knowest thou this?" (Poe, "Morella" 233). Unfortunately for him, Morella did not live long enough to offer any further clarification. He must spend the rest of his existence searching for the answer—which he *feels* is involved in the solution of the other two provoking mysteries of the "fires" that seemed but were not love and of the change that came over his wife.

But there is nothing in Morella's words to suggest her pregnancy was extraordinary, on the contrary, she appears to have been convinced it was perfectly ordinary, and so, in a sense, she is not so much prophesying an unexpected event as she is stating a fact which must have been very obvious by that time. Dawn Keetley, in "Pregnant Women and Envious Men in 'Morella,' 'Berenice,' 'Ligeia,' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher'" seems to have been the first to draw attention to this distinctive aspect of "Morella." In a tale where

the reader *knows* the wife to be literally pregnant, the narrator's unawareness is particularly astonishing. The narrator describes his wife's state as unfathomable (...).

The narrator of 'Morella' can apprehend his wife's condition only as an illness, when he can apprehend it at all. That the narrator retains what on some level can only be a willful blindness to his wife's state is evident in the fact that he sees a *wasting* illness (...); the perversity of apprehending the swelling belly of a pregnant woman this way seems driven by the need to repress what must be quite visible evidence of the truth. In the end, Morella has to tell the narrator, on the very day of the birth, that she is about to deliver a child" (Keetley, "Pregnant Women" 5).<sup>163</sup>

Indeed, the mother did not even venture to predict the sex of the child, which would be more of a gamble, but merely insists that it was *his* child and *hers*. If anything, her insistence suggests that she knew her husband would be surprised. She also predicts her own death, it is true, but this cannot have come as a surprise to her husband either, for he was himself expecting it. The final portion of her address is scarcely more obscure.

Like the dying queen in Perrault's "Peau D'Ane," she was of course telling her husband that he would never find happiness with another woman. More precisely, she places a curse on him: he would never remarry, and would mourn the loss of the woman he despised for the rest of his days. This cannot have come as a surprise to him either. He had already told us that she was well aware of how irksome she had become to him: "she seemed conscious of my weakness or my folly, and, smiling, called it Fate. She seemed, also, conscious of a cause, to me unknown, for the gradual alienation of my regard" (Poe, "Morella" 231). This cause, then, at once obvious to Morella and totally obscure to him, is one of the mysteries of the tale. The solution is obvious, I think: Morella's pregnancy itself, of which the narrator was obviously unaware. Indeed, the announcement of this

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<sup>163</sup> Keetley's article is an exercise in psychoanalytical interpretation (in my opinion, one of the best in its kind in Poe studies). Such readings, however, tend to regard the narrator's phantasies as an expression of Poe's own obsessions, disregarding the well-coded distance between the author and his fictional character. "In the end," Keetley concludes, "the reason Kleinian envy can usefully illuminate the fictional protagonists of Poe is that his fiction emerged at an unprecedented high point in the growing cultural tendency to give the mother-child dyad primacy—a process in which [Melanie] Klein also participated. (...) Poe shares with Klein a belief in innate hostility, compensatory idealization, and an entrenched drive toward destruction" ("Pregnant Women" 12).

pregnancy is the only thing that could have come as a surprise *to the narrator* in Morella's dying words.

Indeed, the only new facts Morella's statement brings to the story are her pregnancy, and that the narrator had fathered a child. The reader certainly could not have guessed it from what been said up to that point. Morella's dying speech is the first intimation of sexual activity in the tale—for, indeed, no effect can be more safely referred to a cause than pregnancy to sexual intercourse, unless some extraordinary, indeed miraculous insemination is admitted. And, according to the narrator's own admission, adultery was out of the question: she had "shunned society, and, attaching herself to me alone, rendered me happy" (Poe, "Morella" 229). Yet, if the narrator really stands behind his statement about the "fires," I cannot quite see how he could account for his wife's pregnancy. At the time, then, the news must have been as surprising to him as they are to the reader who first encounters his tale.

His surprise at his wife's words, then, strongly suggests the narrator had not realised his wife was pregnant until she went into labor. Yet, he had noticed something different about her in the *months* that preceded this crisis. At that point, his feelings changed too: he was no longer pleased by her society, as he once had been, but *irritated* by it. The chronology of this change is consistent with pregnancy: "the time had now arrived," he confesses, "when my wife's society oppressed me as a spell. (...) Shall I say I longed with an earnest and consuming desire for the moment of Morella's decease? I did; but the fragile spirit clung to its tenement of clay for many days—for many weeks and irksome months—until my tortured nerves obtained the mastery over my mind, and I grew furious through delay" (Poe, "Morella" 232).

Poe's narrators have a way of ignoring the most obvious solutions. In the months that preceded the birth of their child, Morella had changed. Was that not to be expected? Perhaps the nature of the "change" in his wife, then, was what the narrator found so extraordinary? But this too seems perfectly trivial: "the crimson spot settled steadily upon the cheek, and the blue veins upon

the forehead became prominent” (Poe, “Morella” 231). The narrator thought that she was dying. After some “months,” she did die, but she also gave birth to a child, and the changes he mentions could as easily have been caused by her pregnancy. Morella, as we have seen, knew why her husband could not wait to see her dead. The cause for this, although “unknown” to the narrator, is also obvious enough. Her pregnancy appears to have put an abrupt end to what seems to have been a rather intense sex-life.

Indeed, his mounting irritation at the delay in the satisfaction of his “consuming desire” suggests the old “fires” were not yet quenched. He could no longer bear the touch of her fingers, her “low” insinuating voice, and her “meaning” eyes. Without realising it, he had evidently been sexually attracted to his wife, and, apparently, he found these things as titillating as ever after her change, only now his desire could no longer be satisfied. At length, his irritation was projected on the object of unsatisfied desire, and “sublimated,” as it were, into a passion to “Pythagorise” Morella, as Wilbur puts it.

This is in keeping with Wollstonecraft’s theory of matrimonial relationships. As we have seen, pregnancy signalled the critical period in a sexual relationship when love should give way to friendship. “The tenderness which a man will feel for the mother of his children,” she wrote, “is an excellent substitute for the ardour of unsatisfied passion” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 200). The implication is that the woman’s libido was inhibited during pregnancy, but the man’s remained active. Therefore, as we have seen, Wollstonecraft thought that the man was forced to repress his sexual desire, a feat which required rationality. The narrator of “Morella,” of course, was not very rational, and he evidently felt no “tenderness” for the mother of his child.

At this juncture, one has a choice of either crediting the narrator, in which case the birth of the second Morella is either a miracle or, as he seems more inclined to believe, a diabolical trick, or question the narrator’s initial assertion that Eros had never visited their home. Indeed, the “mystical” meditations on “personal identity” in which the narrator gets hopelessly tangled are a



way to accommodate the birth of their daughter to that assertion—which is really the axiom of the narrator’s problem. In other words, the reader must choose between an utterly improbable hypothesis which is actually contradicted by the evidence, and the rational explanation intimated by Morella.

The whole tale is an extended meditation on Morella’s words, predicated on the supposition that she was talking “mysticism.” The narrator seems particularly interested, however, in proving that she was wrong about his “ignorance.” His mangling of one of her allusions towards the end of the narrative, however, confirms that he totally missed her point. Speaking of the obscure period after his daughter’s christening, in which he lost track of time, he tells us, as if he intended thus to wrap the moral of his own tale: “Nor was I indeed ignorant of the flowers and the vine, but the hemlock and the cypress overshadowed me night and day” (Poe, “Morella” 236). Evidently, he meant to deny Morella’s assertion that he was “ignorant of the myrtle and the vine,” but, by replacing the first with the generic term “flowers,” he proves beyond a doubt that he attaches no special significance to this particular “flower,” and in that manner confirms the ignorance he intended to deny (Poe, “Morella” 233 emphasis mine).

The allusion to the “myrtle” is, of course, text-book stuff. The ancient Greeks and Romans consecrated the plant to Aphrodite, or Venus, the goddess of love—and this was evidently Morella’s way of intimating her husband’s ignorance of all things venereal. He evidently did not get any of this, and consequently also did not know what it was that he was denying. And how could someone that did not know that the myrtles were *of Venus*, be so certain that the “fires” he felt were not *of Eros*? He appears to have been as little conversant with the biological mysteries of human reproduction as he was with classical mythology.

The narrator may not have spoken “of passion, nor thought of love,” but he certainly appears to have *made* love without realising it. Only this can account for his perplexity. His wife, who should know, and who incidentally did speak of love, albeit in an allusive fashion, was evidently

convinced that he was the father. But how could he possibly *ignore* that he had had sex with his wife? Morella hints an explanation for that too. According to her, the narrator was “ignorant” not only of the “myrtle,” but also of the “vine,” which suggests that he may have *ignored* wine in the same way that he had *ignored* sex, that is, that he may have been equally unfamiliar with the effects of both. In other words, he may have been drunk when he and Morella engaged in sexual activities.

The association of the myrtle and the vine depends on a third classical allusion, at the beginning of Morella’s sentence, to Anacreon of Teos, or the Teian, an ancient Greek lyrical poet well-known for his devotion to love, wine, song, and revelry. Thomas “Anacreon” Moore, who is reported to have been a great influence on Poe’s early poetry, published in 1800 to great popular acclaim a translation of an ancient anthology of poems attributed to the Greek poet, often referred to as the *Anacreontea*, the authenticity of which was, nevertheless, seriously challenged even in his time (Cf. Mabbott, *Tales* 236n). Mabbott, who never suspects Poe’s earnest narrators of being anything but a stand-in for the author, interpreted the reference in Morella as a broad, unspecific allusion to the work of Anacreon, by which Poe merely intended to display his own learning. The reference to Anacreon, however, is very meaningful. The well-established association of the Greek poet with wine and love would be obvious to anyone the least bit acquainted with his reputation (considering the success of Moore’s translation, any self-respecting magazine reader in Poe’s time), however, the myrtle, the vine, and Anacreon, the three elements combined in Morella’s allusion, are seldom mentioned together.

There is a famous passage in Virgil’s *Eclogues* in which the association of the myrtle and the vine respectively with Venus and Bacchus is referred (10.7.61,62), and the *Anacreontea* itself documents the wine-fuelled amatory exploits of the legendary poet. The very first poem of that collection, here given in Moore’s translation, portrays an inebriated and amorous Anacreon: “His lip exhal’d, whene’er he sigh’d, / The fragrance of the racy tide;” “Quick from his glowing brows he

drew / His braid, of many a wanton hue; / I took the braid of wanton twine— / It breath'd of him, and blush'd with wine!" (*Odes* 24-5).

However, though Anacreon's devotion to the vine and the myrtle is confirmed by the highest authority, it seems that nowhere in the canon of Ancient literature is his name mentioned together with the myrtles and the vine. This relatively unusual combination does appear, however, in a source not nearly as prestigious, but which nevertheless enjoyed great popularity in the late 1700s and early 1800s both in England and the United States, and, indeed, through an arbitrary association which its author could not have foreseen, would, a few decades before the publication of "Morella," become permanently associated with American patriotism. I am referring to the hymn of the Anacreontic Society of London, an association of good-natured amateur musicians that gathered at the "Crown and Anchor Tavern in the Strand."<sup>164</sup> The first stanza of this jolly little ditty ran as follows:

To Anacreon in Heav'n, where he sat in full glee,  
A few sons of harmony sent a Petition,  
That he their inspirer and patron would be;  
When this answer arriv'd from the jolly old Grecian—  
Voice, Fiddle, and Flute,

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<sup>164</sup> The hymn of the Anacreontic Society of London, also known as "To Anacreon in Heaven," supplied the melody for many American patriotic songs, among which "Defence of Fort McHenry" (1814) by Francis Scott Key, which was finally officially adopted as the American national anthem in 1931, under the title "The Star-Spangled Banner."

My argument presupposes that Poe knew the song. As O. G. Sonneck showed in his study of the origins of "The Star-Spangled Banner," the hymn of the Anacreontic Society, originally published in 1778, remained for decades a favorite in England. Sonneck lists 21 publications in magazines and anthologies of popular music between 1780 and 1804. Its inclusion in *The Songster's Miscellany*, published in Philadelphia in 1817, and in *The Universal Songster: or, Museum of Mirth*, which appeared in London in 1832 (and was reprinted in 1834) shows that the original song remained popular in both sides of the Atlantic for many years. Indeed, for a while, the song in a sense usurped the place of Anacreon's own poems. Indeed, "'To Anacreon in Heaven,'" Sonneck remarks, "became popularly known (...) as 'The Anacreontic Song.' Of the many Anacreontic songs of the time it appears to have been the only one to have gained such distinction" (55).

Concerning its reception in America, Sonneck writes: "it is now known that the musical intercourse between England and America was too lively in those days to have permitted such a well-known air as 'To Anacreon in Heaven,' published in the most popular collections, to have remained barred from our shores" (*Star-Spangled Banner* 61). Poe can simply not be supposed to have ignored one of the most popular songs of his time, and one which was then known simply as *the* anacreontic song.

No longer be mute,  
I'll lend ye my name and inspire ye to boot:  
And, besides I'll instruct ye, like me, to intwine

The myrtle of Venus with Bacchus's vine (Tomlinson, "To Anacreon in Heaven" 21)

The poem is composed of six uniform stanzas of nine verses. The ninth verse forms, with the alternating forms "twine" and "entwined" at the end of the eight, a sort of burden to the song. Thus, the unusual combination that we found in "Morella" is the central motive of the hymn of the Anacreontics. A translation of Anacreon's fifth ode by a very young Thomas Moore, contained a similar passage, but the myrtle was there replaced by the rose: "Let us, with the clustering vine, / The rose, Love's blushing flower, entwine" (Moore, Preface xxiii). I suspect Moore's translation may itself have been inspired by "To Anacreon in Heaven." In the original Greek, the flower was unquestionably a rose (ρόδον), which was also associated with Venus.

There may, however, be another learned joke implied in Poe's text. In his 1827 commentary to the ode, John Broderick Roche mentions that: "The ancients used perfumes and wreaths of flowers in their entertainments, because they imagined, (as Plutarch remarks) that odours hindered the wine from overpowering them" (*First Twenty-Eight Odes* 34n). Presumably, it is to this custom that the ode alludes. The same commentator also points out, however, that in the weaving of such garlands, or chaplets, the myrtle was also sometimes used, a flower which, he writes, "in reality, possessed an astringent quality, and may dissipate the fumes of wine," a virtue he did not recognise to the rose (34n). This intertextual connection strengthens the supposition that Morella meant to suggest her husband was drunk when he made love to her when she told him he was "ignorant" of both the myrtle and the vine, for, according to Roche, the former is the *only* flower that had the virtue of offsetting the deleterious influences of wine.

In any case, the song of the Anacreontics resonates significantly with Poe's tale and, indeed, when the reader connects the two, the seemingly vague allusion acquires, suddenly but irreversibly,

a definite meaning that has an obvious, and humorous bearing on the plot. Although he was never as crude as other ancient poets, like Martial for example, love was in Anacreon's time, as Moore himself put it, "rather an unrefined emotion, and the intercourse of the sexes was animated more by passion than sentiment" (*Odes* 14). In other words, the broad-minded approach to love of Classical Antiquity was in stark contrast with the demure sentimentality of Moore's and Poe's time. The allusion thereby brings into strongest relief the signs that show the narrator's opinions on the matter were distorted by the sentimental whitewashed depictions of love typical of his time, in which sex was either very subtly hinted or altogether omitted.

The narrator's own pedantry also forms a comical contrast with the Anacreontic Society which, judging from its hymn, made no serious claim to scholarship, but evidently prided themselves on being acquainted with love and wine. The allusion to the drinking song of the Anacreontics strengthens, moreover, our already well-founded suspicions that Morella had not only taught him how to read, but also how to love. The irresistible emergence of the sexuality the narrator denies, both through Morella's pregnancy and through her allusions, expose to ridicule his notions of love, and with it his fiction of a wholly spiritualised marriage.

The narrator was also at a loss to explain the resemblance between the mother and her daughter. He thought it absolutely extraordinary. His ignorance of sexual matters perfectly accounts for this fact. Since he rules out as a matter of course the natural explanation, his efforts to solve this mystery are totally misguided. No matter how hard he tried, neither Fichte, Schelling, the Pythagoreans, or Locke, which the narrator tells us he had studied under Morella, could ever help him understand why a daughter resembles her mother, or how babies were born—even if he could get some sense out of them, which, judging from his text, seems very doubtful.

It appears to me that the ridicule clearly reflects on Godwin. In *Memoirs*, he implicitly recognises his relative sexual inexperience. Wollstonecraft, of course, had already had a daughter by Imlay: "She had already had some experience on the subject in the case of Fanny; and I cheerfully

submitted in every point to her judgement and her wisdom” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 112). Thus, Godwin admits he did not understand the philosophy of childbirth, and I think that Poe deliberately exploited the comical potential of such statements.

In fact, Godwin ignored, or affected to ignore, a great deal more. Not only does he express repulsion for sex, like Morella’s husband, he describes his relationship with his wife in terms that suggest this played no appreciable role in their relationship. This climaxes in his claim, which I have already mentioned, that their intercourse was almost like “the communication of spirits” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 104). Thus, I insist, Godwin’s conception of love is scarcely less “metaphysical” than that of Morella’s husband. As a result, his wife’s pregnancy, and her much more outspoken take on sexuality, haunt his narrative as effectively as Morella’s words haunt her husband’s tale, constantly reminding the reader of the sexuality he denies. He plainly states, at least, that he and his wife did not *think* of love until they *made* it. Thus, the extreme prudery he displays in dealing with such matters results in the ridiculous suggestion that they had sex without realising that they were doing it, which is exactly the same impression that we get from “Morella.” Poe’s narrator, on the other hand, appears to have been truly as ignorant of sex as Godwin affects to be, and this appears to me to have been Poe’s way of intimating that Godwin was a hypocrite. Indeed, the blindness of Poe’s narrator is too preposterous to be credible. One gets the feeling, that is, that it would be impossible for any real person to be as ignorant as Poe’s character shows himself to be.

He thinks of his daughter as “the second Morella” (see “Morella,” 236). His choice of a name manifests his conviction in the supernatural rebirth of the first, which must in turn be traced to his deep-rooted conviction that the “fires” were “not of Eros.” Indeed, his narrative totally erases his own involvement in the affair: in effect, he tells us that the child was *all* Morella. Like the narrator of “The Black Cat,” he comes up with a nonsensical explanation that supplies the place of the chain of probable cause. Since this explanation is, however, totally unconvincing, we are forced to conclude that, unbeknownst to the narrator, the “fires” were exactly what they seemed, a sexual

metaphor. And this sexual metaphor then sets the whole text a-flaming. Consider for example the most outrageously “quaint” paragraph in the tale, in which the narrator details his intercourse with his wife in the early days of their marriage:

In all of this, if I err not, my reason had little to do. My convictions, or I forget myself, were in no manner acted upon by the ideal, nor was any tincture of the mysticism which I read, to be discovered, unless I am greatly mistaken, either in my deeds or in my thoughts. Persuaded of this, I abandoned myself implicitly to the guidance of my wife, and entered with an unflinching heart into the intricacies of her studies. And then—then, when poring over forbidden pages, I felt a forbidden spirit enkindling within me—would Morella place her cold hand upon my own, and rake up from the ashes of a dead philosophy—some low singular words, whose strange meaning burned themselves in upon my memory. And then, hour after hour, would I linger by her side, and dwell upon the music of her voice—until, at length, its melody was tainted, with terror, —and there fell a shadow upon my soul—and I grew pale, and shuddered inwardly at those too unearthly tones. And thus, joy suddenly faded into horror, and the most beautiful became the most hideous, as Hinnom became Gehenna. (Poe, “Morella” 230 emphasis mine)<sup>165</sup>

In her famous psychoanalytical study of Poe, Marie Bonaparte maintained that “Morella,” as also “Berenice” and “Ligeia,” were tales of “transference,” and that Poe himself had unconsciously projected on the title characters his infantile sexual attraction for his own mother:

Thus the bonds which once united the tiny boy to his mother are recalled, as also his dependence on her for instruction in the forbidden, ‘accursed’ lore—doubtless sexual knowledge—of which she held the key. Due, however, to the original incest prohibition, which imposed a sex barrier between mother and child, the boy’s first

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<sup>165</sup> In the second part of this dissertation I have commented on the grammatical blunder in this paragraph.

resentment is later visited upon the wife, with the result that his “joy” fades “into horror.” Thus, Poe’s ungratified libido, to which normal channels of satisfaction were denied, became changed into the morbid anxiety to which these *Tales* bear witness.

(*Life* 222)

I think that Bonaparte’s insight is flawless. The passage of the tale I have just transcribed clearly intimates that the knowledge Morella was imparting to her husband was sexual, and also that he was unaware of this fact. However, it appears to me that Bonaparte’s identification of Poe with the narrator is unwarranted by the text, and indeed that he must have been as fully aware of the sexual undertones of these statements as Bonaparte herself. Before the ridiculous accumulation of expressions of doubt in this paragraph, indeed, the idea that Poe shared his narrator’s ignorance, or unawareness of sex, cannot be seriously entertained. In fact, Bonaparte’s phrase “ungratified libido” is misleading in the context. She thought that “Morella,” as all of Poe’s tales of woman, provided evidence of the writer’s impotence. To be more precise, she thought that the narrator was impotent, and identified him unproblematically with Poe himself. However, Morella’s pregnancy affords very strong evidence that he had had sexual intercourse with her at least once. Besides, the hints that indicate that Morella was imparting sexual knowledge, which Bonaparte herself brings to our attention, let us conclude sex was habitual with them. Indeed, if he ignored sex once, what was there to prevent him from keep on ignoring it?

But this disguised account of his narrator’s sexual initiation appears designed to intimate to the reader his ridiculous blindness. Indeed, if we discount the “mystical,” as in fact the narrator himself advises us to do, the intercourse being described looks like nothing in the world but sex, or rather as what one imagines sex would look like to a man that had no clue of what was going on, even though he was one of the parties involved—if such an absurd man can be conceived. Therefore, Bonaparte was, I believe, right in considering that the tale represented the horror with which a child regards sex; she suggests that Poe was himself unaware of this content, but the sheer



absurdity of his narrator's claims suggest otherwise. There was, he tells us, nothing "metaphysical" about his thoughts and deeds (or he forgets himself). Thus, the narrator himself challenges us to find something else which may fit his description—something *physical*.

Though ignorant of the obvious key to the mysteries of procreation, sex, the narrator is actually right about the statements about which he is less certain—this is generally true of all of Poe's narrators. "Reason," to be sure, "had very little to do" with his love (the time-worn complaint of all lovers, from Alcaeus, Sappho, and Anacreon down to our time), and even less with his ramblings—his conclusions are in fact outrageously irrational; and there was, after all, nothing spiritual about his "thoughts" or, more to the point, his "deeds," which, judging from ulterior developments, were as gross and sinful as the average honest husband's. In the early incomplete draft of the tale (Mabbott's text A), Poe made it even clearer that his narrator was not *thinking*: "In all this, if I think aright, my powers of thought predominated" ("Morella" 226). This is the same ridiculously tautological diction that we find everywhere in the tale, and which makes it impossible to take the narrator seriously.

Given the collapse of the superficial "mystical" or "metaphysical" meaning, the only meaning that remains viable is the distinctly sexual suggested "physical" meaning. Thus, for example, to "enter" "into the intricacies of her studies" stands—can only stand—for sexual penetration. Indeed, the word "intricacies" is probably a buried allusion to "The Intricacies of Diego and Julia" in *Tristram Shandy*, which I have already mentioned a propos of Ligeia's eyes. There, Sterne had ostensibly, but very unconvincingly, denied that a sexual encounter was taking place, through ambiguous "metaphysical" language, and this appears to me to be precisely the same strategy that Poe employs in "Morella."

Poe may also have drawn inspiration for this passage from James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), and specifically from an episode in the "Editor's Tale" that precedes the main narrative where the word "metaphysical" is used in an

ostensibly ironical way in reference to clandestine sexual activity. The “Editor’s Tale” deals with the marriage of Lord and Lady Dalcastle, the official parents of the protagonist of the main narrative, the “justified sinner” of the title. The two spouses had very different views on married life. The Lady, who was as ostensibly averse to sexual activity as the narrator of “Morella,” complained that : “The laird would neither pray morning nor evening. He would not even sing psalms, and kneel beside her while she performed the exercise; neither would he converse at all times, and in all places, about the sacred mysteries of religion, although this lady took occasion to contradict flatly every assertion that he made, in order that she might spiritualize him by drawing him into argument” (Hogg, *Private Memoirs* 10-11). The “Laird,” however, did not consent to be “spiritualised.”

Their contrasting expectations regarding married life had been apparent from their wedding night:

The laird went up to caress her [Lady Dalcastle]; but she turned away her head, and spoke of the follies of aged men, and something of the broad way that leadeath to destruction. The laird did not thoroughly comprehend this allusion; but being considerably flustered by drinking, and disposed to take all in good part, he only remarked, as he took off his shoes and stockings, “that, whether the way was broad or narrow, it was time that they were in their bed.” (Hogg, *Private Memoirs* 5)

The “laird” was evidently as ignorant of the “metaphysical” meaning of his wife’s words as the narrator of “Morella,” but unlike him, he did not pretend to understand what she told him. Instead, he turns her scriptural imagery to racy sexual metaphor. Indeed, the narrator of “Morella” appears to combine Lord Dalcastle’s ignorance of “metaphysical” subjects with his wife’s puritanical scorn for sexual activity.

However, the episode which bears the most distinct resemblance with Poe’s tale is a memorable interview between the Lady and her spiritual adviser, the reverend Wringhim, during

which the reader is given to understand the hero of the main narrative had been conceived. Wringhim, after hearing the Lady's complaints about her husband, went to scold him for his impiety, and returns to "his metaphysical associate," as the Lady is sarcastically styled, to report his "wonderful success:" "it was their custom," the editor-narrator remarks, "on each visit, to sit up a night in the same apartment, for the sake of sweet spiritual converse" (Hogg, *Private Memoirs* 15). In the sequence, of course, it becomes clear their association was not wholly spiritual. Although their interview was private, Martha, the servant, overheard a heated discussion of a particularly knotty point of religious doctrine: "If the listener's words were to be relied on, there was no love, no accommodating principle manifested between the two, but a fiery burning zeal, relating to points of such minor importance that a true Christian would blush to hear them mentioned, and the infidel and profane make a handle of them to turn our religion to scorn" (16). As it turns out, what the eavesdropping maid construed as "a fiery burning" religious "zeal," was, in fact, "love," as may be gleaned from subsequent developments. For although Lady Dalcastle "would not consort with her husband," the "saintly and afflicted dame, in due time, was safely delivered of a fine boy" (16).

The humorous effect in "Morella" is based on the narrator's *ignoring* the only way his wife could have become pregnant—as the editor in Hogg's narrative pretends to ignore the only way Lady Dalcastle could have become pregnant. He too felt a "fire" that drew him to his wife, and also claimed that it was a sort of "metaphysical" enthusiasm, giving us to understand they too, like Wringhim and Lady Dalcastle, were only "spiritual associates."

Hogg, moreover, clearly hints that the Lady's religious mania had developed into a case of sexual fetishism. That is, that religious zeal had become with her a sort of substitute for sexual desire to the point the two became so closely associated in her mind as to be inseparable and indistinguishable. This realisation affects, of course, all previous references to spiritual intercourse. It now becomes clear, for example, what truly lay behind the lady's wish that her husband might discuss religious matters with her "at all times, and in all places," and what the narrator had meant

when he said that she contradicted her husband “in order that she might spiritualize him by drawing him into argument”—evidently, her efforts, which had proved completely ineffective on her uncultured husband, were not wasted on the reverend Wringhim, who appears to have been as excited by “metaphysics” as she was. Again, we glimpse the same kind of fetishism behind the statements of Morella’s husband, who also appears to have been aroused by her “metaphysical” disquisitions.

The narrator cannot make any sense of the fire as a mystical symbol, and neither could anyone else; considered as a sexual metaphor, however, it makes perfect sense, especially in the context of conjugality. “Enkindled” by the joint effect of his wife’s touch and “meaning” words, the lover “would linger by her side,” “hour after hour,” until the melodious voice which conveyed that “meaning” that so disturbed the husband was “tainted with horror,” and his pleasure turned to distress. This disturbing transition, however, contrary to what one would expect had the *thing* not been sex, was repeated *habitually*. Despite his horror, he kept coming back, apparently quite often, for some more “lingering.” And whenever he did “linger” by his wife, just as her low voice became a scream, he “shuddered inwardly.” Evidently, Morella did not merely *talk* about sex. It would appear that what her husband construed as screams of terror were, in reality, screams of pleasure; his inner “shuddering,” on the other hand, suggests that their intercourse was mutually satisfying—what else could it possibly mean? From the start, it had been the narrator’s word against his wife’s that sex, the trivial cause of all non-miraculous pregnancies, had formed an important part of their intercourse. After all is said and done, he himself unwittingly suggests that this was indeed the case.

These things had precisely the trivial meaning the narrator denies, and this in turn suggests that Morella’s meditations on “that identity *which at death is or is not lost forever*” were no more mystic than their intercourse was “metaphysical.” After so much “lingering” by each other’s side, a pregnancy would be far from unexpected. The verb “linger,” of course, chimes in with Morella’s statement that, as a lover, the narrator “played the Teian with time,” and with his own admission

that he could no more “regulate” the “intensity” of the “fires” than he could understand their nature (Poe, “Morella” 229).

Mabbott thought the phrase “play the Teian with time” alluded to the view, attributed to Anacreon in *Child Harold’s Pilgrimage*, that old men are not immune to love: “Love conquers age (...) / So sings the Teian, and he sings in sooth” (qtd. in Mabbott 237n10). Thus, Mabbott believes Morella was telling her husband that he would not know love in his old age, after her passing. But this reading is not quite viable in the context. She tells him he will “no longer (...) play the Teian with time,” which means, of course, that she is referring to something he had been in the habit of doing with her (emphasis mine). Via Anacreon, she evokes the idea of unrestrained sexual ardour. This, in the context, can only be taken as an oblique allusion to the oldest known contraceptive method, *coitus interruptus*, which, of course, required the man somewhat to “regulate” the “fires” of his passion. Morella’s pregnancy may not have been entirely unexpected—to her, at least, it was evidently no mystery—, but it may have been unplanned. In other words, the narrator may have “lingered”—a highly significant choice of words—a little too long.

The possibility of Poe intending to crack sexual jokes, however, has seldom been considered, as, through identification with the prudish narrators of “Morella” and “Ligeia,” he is normally thought of as a writer who is peculiarly disconnected from the prosaic realities of love; therefore, sexual innuendos in his works have generally been regarded as unconscious slips. But one has only to consider one of his early tales, “Loss of Breath,” to realise just how inaccurate this perception of Poe as someone blind to sexuality is. This tale was an extended sexual metaphor of impotence, a *tour de force* in double entendre, which in many ways anticipates Poe’s later fictional treatment of conjugality. As Ellen Weinauer has pointed out, “‘A Decided Loss’ would suggest that, from the beginning of his publishing career, marriage was certainly on Poe’s mind” (“Undead Wives” 174). Here is the opening scene of that tale:<sup>166</sup>

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166 Weinauer also remarks that: “Critics have paid little attention to ‘A Decided Loss’ or its later avatars; and whatever treatment the story has received offers little analysis of the immediate post nuptial setting of the narrator’s misogynistic attack” (“Undead Wives” 174).

“Thou wretch!—thou vixen!—thou shrew!” said I to my wife on the morning of the our wedding, ‘thou witch! —thou hag!—thou whipper-snapper!—thou sink of iniquity!—thou fiery-faced quintessence of all that is abominable!—thou—thou” here standing upon tip-toe, seizing her by the throat, and placing my mouth close to her ear, I was preparing to launch forth a new and more decisive epithet of opprobrium, which should not have failed, if ejaculated, to convince her of her insignificance, when, to my extreme horror and astonishment, I discovered that *I had lost my breath*. (Poe, “Loss of Breath” 62)

Here we find the narrator about to kill his wife at the end of their wedding night, and calling her a witch, which is exactly what the more subtle narrators of “Morella” and “Ligeia” suggest their wives were. He also significantly maligns her as a “sink of iniquity,” thus evoking the mythical view that identifies women with sexuality, and sexuality with corruption. His “loss of breath,” significantly termed an inability to “ejaculate,” on the other hand, is a remarkably transparent disguise of his impotence. The narrator, it is true, means his loss of breath quite literally, and acknowledges the paradox the statement involves. He should be dead, yet he was alive. At the same time, he also intimates, through that involuntary eloquence we so often find in Poe—or, I should rather say, in his characters—, that this preposterous hypothesis disguised the real nature of his problem, which he was too mortified to face:

Throwing myself upon a chair. I remained for some time absorbed in meditation. My reflections, to be sure, were of no consolatory kind. A thousand vague and lachrymatory fancies took possession of my soul—and even the idea of suicide flitted across my brain; but it is a trait in the perversity of human nature to reject the obvious and the ready, for the far-distant and equivocal (Poe, “Loss of Breath” 63).

And this, of course, is precisely what the narrator of this tale, like his counterparts in “Berenice,” “Morella,” “Ligeia,” and “The Black Cat,” proceeds to do. Poe, on the other hand,

exploits the public's own "perversity" to disguise the true submerged meaning of his double entendre tales, where the sexual is disguised as "metaphysical," and an assortment of ridiculously learned allusions are deployed to further the ruse.

The hostility of Lackobreath towards his wife, then, is evidently rooted in his feeling of humiliation for not having been able to perform sexually on their wedding night, but his impotence is transfigured into "pulmonary incapacity" (Poe, "Loss of Breath" 63). The intensity of his feelings of humiliation—he felt even the house pets were laughing at him—, however, which seem manifestly exaggerated when referred to the ostensible cause of his mortification, intimates the real nature of the problem. This sexual performance anxiety, of course, must be understood in the broader context of the masculinist attitudes and perceptions which Poe was evidently challenging. Significantly, Mr. Lackobreath shrinks from the possibility of self-murder, but has no qualm about "seizing" his wife "by the throat" (61). He evidently projects his feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing on her. In other words, Lackobreath felt emasculated, and took it out on his wife, which I think is also what happens in "Morella" and "Ligeia."

"Loss of Breath," incidentally, is an early example of Poe's use of a variety of sexual word-play that may ultimately be traced to *Tristram Shandy*. We have already seen how he used eye contact in "Ligeia" as a metaphor of sex, and how this strategy depended on an allusion to Slawkenbergius's tale in Sterne's novel. In that tale, the "low" voice of the characters was another sign of sexual intimacy. In "Loss of Breath," then, Poe employed a similar strategy, but there sexual intercourse is more ostensibly associated with violence. To his surprise, Mr. Lackobreath found that "the powers of utterance" he thought were "totally destroyed, were in fact only partially impeded," adding:

I discovered that had I at that interesting crisis, dropped my voice to a singularly deep guttural, I might still have continued to her [his wife] the communication of my

sentiments; this pitch of voice (the guttural) depending, I find, not upon the current of the breath, but upon certain spasmodic action of the muscles of the throat.

(Poe, “Loss of Breath” 63)

The “interesting crisis” to which he refers, of course, is the opening scene of the tale, when, as he was strangling his wife, he found himself constrained to interrupt the torrent of verbal abuse he had been showering on her. This is paradigmatic of the strange transference of “feeling” peculiar to his narrative. At that particular time, it was the wife’s respiratory tract—not the narrator’s—that was being constrained, therefore, she was the one who should not be able to speak but in a low guttural tone. And the same reasoning applies to Ligeia, whose voice as she “wrestled with the Shadow,” and “amid the most convulsive writhings of her fierce spirit,” “grew more low” (Poe, “Ligeia” 317). Thus, what had been in *Tristram Shandy* a metonym of sexual intimacy, becomes, in Poe’s grotesque tales, a metonym of the sexual aggression that is the only viable outlet for the sexual drive of Poe’s repressed narrators. Indeed, I cannot agree with Weinauer, who, despite recognising that the narrator’s assault of his wife constitutes a “misogynous attack,” sees the narrator’s loss of breath as evidence that Poe was “equally, if not more, concerned with the effects of marriage on men,” than he was with its effect on women, with the argument that “it is the husband who is killed by marriage, the one who loses his breath” (“Undead Wives” 174, 178).

The hostility of the narrators of “Morella” and “Ligeia” is, of course, as clearly rooted in sexual anxieties—their sexual anxieties, not Poe’s. Indeed, contrary to what appearances may suggest, Poe is perhaps the author least suited to psychoanalytical readings. For he specialised in the conscious simulation of the “unconsciousness” of his narrators; he developed, that is, his own method for dramatising that “perversity,” as Lackobreath calls it, by which the obvious and trivial, but unacceptable sexual content is given an acceptable, if illogical, form. By means of this “perversity,” the narrator is permitted to ignore, or pretend to ignore, the real meaning of his complaints.



Psychoanalytic readings, then, presuppose the author's unawareness of the latent sexual content of his work. Sexual content in Poe's tales, however, is made "latent," so to speak, for the purposes of satire. And it seems to me that "serious" tales like "Morella" and "Ligeia" are, in that respect, no different from "A Loss of Breath." His tales of femicide, and indeed all tales of femicide, continue a tradition of literary representation of marriage in Gothic fiction which probed the role cultural and ideological factors played in promoting and validating male sexual aggression. The femicide story tended to highlight how an increasingly stringent moral code had rendered sexuality invisible in the public sphere. Sexual content had to be disguised under a cloak of sentimentality and therefore, in a sense, had become invisible. It also suggested that there was an intimate relationship between this wholesale repression of sexuality and violent male sexual behaviour.

In "Morella" and "Ligeia," however, Poe went a step further, and suggested the sort of sexual anxiety he had first depicted in "Loss of Breath" was itself associated with another kind of male anxiety, which expressed itself in hostility toward female intellectuals. Godwin, in this sense, was the perfect representative of the femicide mentality. His belief that the "earthly frame" was an "impediment" to love, conceived as the "communication of spirits," perfectly embodied that radical sentimentality that equated the body with corruption (*Memoirs* 104). His thinly veiled hostility towards women, which for Godwin clearly represented the flesh, was, from a symbolic point of view, almost explicitly femicidal. His aggressive revision of Wollstonecraft was, in another sense, no less femicidal. Poe's tales dramatise, I think, the contemporary conflict between this extreme masculinist sentimentality and a more reasonable take on sexuality and gender relations, which is represented in the tales by the female title-characters.

Ironically, Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's relationship was perfectly representative of this conflict, and, by writing tales that clearly evoke their story, and Godwin's narrative of it in

particular, Poe meant, I think, to highlight this fact. Indeed, she had been one of the staunchest opponents of the wholesale repression of sexuality that Godwin had advocated:

To speak disrespectfully of love is, I know, high treason against sentiment and fine feelings; but I wish to speak the simple language of truth, and rather to address the head than the heart. To endeavour to reason love out of the world, would be to out Quixote Cervantes, and equally offend against common sense; but an endeavour to restrain this tumultuous passion, and to prove that it should not be allowed to dethrone superior powers, or to usurp the sceptre which the understanding should ever coolly wield, appears less wild.

(Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 96)

Surely, Poe's narrators illustrate the dangers of reasoning love out of the world. They offend against common sense by falling back on masculinist sentimental superstitions. But then, so did Godwin. This, I believe, was the point Poe was trying to make.

## 5 – The Return of Wollstonecraft

Morella's husband's conviction that her words enclosed some occult import, then, is a direct consequence of his inability to recognise their obvious and trivial meaning. He thus misinterprets her according to his own superstition. And Morella sounds remarkably like Wollstonecraft. She too had an interest in metaphysics, and sometimes adopted a decidedly mystical tone. She even spoke of reincarnation on occasion. Godwin, on the other hand, creating an artificial separation between Wollstonecraft's feminism and her religious thought—which were very much integrated—misrepresents her thought much like Poe's narrators misrepresent that of their wives.

In reality, in *A Vindication* religion itself was subordinated to the overriding feminist argument, as the following passage makes clear:

I come round to my old argument; if woman be allowed to have an immortal soul, she must have, as the employment of life, an understanding to improve. And when, to render the present state more complete, though every thing proves it to be but a fraction of a mighty sum, she is incited by present gratification to forget her grand destination, [nature] is counteracted, or she was born only to procreate and rot. Or, granting brutes, of every description a soul, though not a reasonable one, the exercise of instinct and sensibility may be the step, which they are to take, in this life, toward the attainment of reason in the next; so that through all eternity they will lag behind man, who, why we cannot tell, had the power given him of attaining reason in his first mode of existence. (Wollstonecraft 132)

This passage shows us a Wollstonecraft that is very different from what Godwin's portrait of her would lead us to expect. He painted her as somewhat of a mystic. Here, however, rather than presenting an intuitive vision of religion, she is subjecting accepted religious notions to rational criticism, in order to expose what she regards as their inherent contradiction. If reason, which is

effectively denied to women, is what distinguishes humans from other animals, then woman is not human, hence, has no soul. To highlight the fact that women had been excluded from the Enlightenment enterprise, she proposes an ironical epicycle, that would reconcile the idea of a general emancipation of all humans with the idea that women were not capable of reason. The idea of reincarnation, of course, is not meant to be taken seriously. This is another way of saying that men's unrealistic notions concerning women inevitably lead to superstition; it is the kind of theory, she suggests, that men might come up with to accommodate their irrational notions about women and justify their absolute rule.

When, in *A Vindication* and in *Letters* she insisted that women were immortal, and indeed, that she herself was immortal, she meant to say that women were endowed with reason. I have argued before that Ligeia was making the exact same point, and that her husband misunderstood her. She was saying that she was “part and parcel” in God, but, in his masculinist interpretation, the female subject is subsumed under “man.” By “we,” the narrator thought, she meant “Man,” and this is the fundamental assumption behind the ingenuous interpretation of the tale. This assumption in turn pivots on the mythical view, which Ligeia's tone helps effectually to evoke, that woman was made for man.

This ingenuous reading of the tale is perfectly captured by the letter Philip Pendleton Cooke wrote to Poe about “Ligeia,” which I have already quoted in the first chapter: “The whole piece is but a sermon from the text of ‘Joseph Glanvill’ which you cap it with—and your intent is to tell a tale of the ‘mighty will’ contending with & finally vanquishing death.” That is certainly the *narrator's* intention. The conception of immortality that underpins the narrator's interpretation of the motto is, however, highly unusual. There would be nothing unusual, of course, about stating the immortality of the soul, but the narrator takes Ligeia's words to refer to some sort of earthly immortality. Indeed, he is convinced that Ligeia returned in her own body, and that the motto of the tale anticipated, as Cooke immediately realised, her supposed resurrection: “For God is but a great

will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (Poe, "Ligeia" 310). The narrator of the tale, then, reads this passage as a prophecy of Ligeia’s return—again, identifying her with the “man” in the second sentence. Thus, the apparent fulfilment of the prophecy retroactively settles the meaning of the passage for him. As we have seen, however, his belief that Ligeia returned from the grave is clearly an illusion of his own creation. Thus, her words became a self-fulfilling prophecy for him.

According to the official interpretation, expressed by Cooke in the above quotation, then, man dies because he *consents* to die. Ligeia supposedly proved the assertion—she had not consented to die. More precisely, and still according to the suggested interpretation, man dies because his will lacks “intentness.” Therefore, it is implied, man would overcome the contingency of death if only he would *will* it, and keep his purpose steadily in view. One gets the distinct feeling that “man” dies... because he gets distracted.

This is a very singular conception indeed. The narrator claims he found it in Glanvill, but the passage could never be located. The English divine, as we have seen, did pen some very suggestive theories about witches and the power of their concentrated wills to effect great wonders, but, as far as can be ascertained, it never occurred to him that man died because he got distracted. It did occur, however, to Godwin.

“In a word,” he asked in the first edition of *Political Justice*, in the same chapter where he predicted the end of sex, “why may not man be one day immortal?” ([1793] 862). For Godwin, it is all a matter, precisely, of “willing” it:

If our involuntary thoughts can derange or restore the animal economy, why should we not in process of time, in this as in other instances, subject the thoughts which are at present involuntary to the government of design? If volition can now do something, why should it not go on to do still more and more? (...) if we have in any

respect a little power now, and if mind be essentially progressive, that power may, and, barring any extraordinary concussions of nature, infallibly will, extend beyond any bounds we are able to prescribe to it.

(*Political Justice* [1793] 865 emphasis mine)

Godwin conceived history in teleological terms. Society was imperfect because it was not organised according to rational principles, but rather arbitrary forms that had been handed down by tradition. As these forms were gradually replaced with those suggested by reason, as Godwin thought would inevitably come to pass, society would evolve to a state of absolute political justice, in which hierarchical relations and government itself would disappear. In other words, Godwin thought man would live more and more deliberately. And as in the body politic, so in the body proper. Once man exerted complete voluntary control over his body, his health would be perfect, and consequently life could be indefinitely extended. This is, again, from the first edition of *Political Justice*: “We are sick and die, generally speaking, because we consent to suffer these accidents. This consent in the present state of mankind is in some degree unavoidable. We must have stronger motives and clearer views, before we can uniformly refuse it” ([1793] 869 emphasis mine).

The expectation that social reform would result in an increase in life expectancy is reasonable enough, especially considering the appalling sanitary conditions among workers during the Industrial Revolution. But Godwin is not speaking metaphorically. Rather than a cautious promise of increased longevity and vitality, he commits himself to the belief that the development of “man’s volition will permit him to overcome death, which has hitherto determined his existence;” man, he writes, will “banish death” and “maintain the body in perpetual youth and vigour” (*Political Justice* [1793] 866). Godwin is being quite literal. The time has not yet arrived, however, for man to “uniformly refuse” death, that is for *all* men to be immortal. But he leaves the door ajar:

even as he wrote, some exceptionally enlightened wight might possibly overcome death in anticipation of the general emancipation, for death was then only “in some degree unavoidable.”

However, by far the most original aspect of Godwin’s theory is his claim that the “principle of immortality”—this is, again, from the first edition of *Political Justice*— “can be considered as partaking of “the nature of attention;” “though the faculty of attention may at present have a very small share of ductility, it is probable that it may be improved in that respect to an inconceivable degree” ([1793] 867). This view implicates a strong correlation between life and consciousness, and, conversely, between its interruption and death: “If an unintermitted attention to the animal economy be necessary, then, before death can be banished, we must banish sleep, death’s image. Sleep is one of the most conspicuous infirmities of the human frame” (867-68). Godwin, therefore, aspires to extend consciousness to all aspects of the animal economy.

In his view, then, in order to become immortal, all man had to do was to abolish the “unconscious.” I am using the word in its broadest possible sense. For Godwin, man will be in “perfect” health of body when his life, biologically considered, becomes as it were, a period of uninterrupted consciousness, or, in other words, when life itself becomes an entirely voluntary act. The theory, although relegated to an appendix, was not omitted, nor even substantially altered in the final revision of *Political Justice*. According to the revised text, we should keep “our voluntary motions” from “degenerating into involuntary,” as “the true perfection of man” is “to attain, as nearly as possible, to the perfectly voluntary state;” who is to say that we may not “finally obtain an empire over every articulation of our frame?” (*Political Justice* [1985] 773-74). In order to achieve this state of perfection, man must develop “the skill of carrying on a great number of contemporaneous processes without disorder,” so as never to lose sight of the functioning of the body (*Political Justice* [1985] 774). “Man,” as Godwin had made explicit in the first edition of the text, would not sleep, that he might keep perpetual vigilance over even those most minute physiological functions that now elude his “will.”

Godwin's seemingly neurotic obsession with the "animal economy," bordering on mania, is, to my mind, just a step away from the glorious deliriums of Daniel Paul Schreber. Man may any time soon become immortal, provided he achieves perfect control of all his bodily functions. Godwin is a philosopher, hence, a most rational and deliberate man. He is, therefore, at the forefront of human improvement. The conclusion is inevitable: if only he could keep his attention rivetted to his "animal economy," which means no sleep, he might just become the harbinger of the glorious age of human perfection. In a word, why might not Godwin one day be immortal?

His bold prophesying was all the more remarkable for its novelty. No one had ever dared attach such brilliant hopes to the prospect of human perfectibility.<sup>167</sup> Naturally, Godwin's prophecy did not go unnoticed by his detractors. It afforded a perfect pretext for satire—in fact, many caricaturists found that they had no need to distort Godwin's statements about immortality, which were ridiculous enough in and of themselves.

Perhaps the best example of this is Isaac D'Israeli's *Flim-Flams! or, The Life and Errors of My Uncle* (1805), a lampoon of political radicalism and rationalist philosophy which targeted Godwin personally, focusing, precisely, on the wild anticipations of a world without "propagation." Godwin is there represented in the novel by the self-conceited and ostensibly absurd philosopher Caconous, to whose bombastic statements D'Israeli appends footnotes with similar dicta extracted from Godwin's *Political Justice*. In fact, possibly with a view to prevent formal accusations of slander that the reviews of the first edition had hinted, D'Israeli was extra careful in the second, and often included full references, complete with page number, to the first edition of *Political Justice*.<sup>168</sup>

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167 Indeed, he prides himself on being the first that ventured to assert that man would inevitably become immortal as a result of his intellectual improvement, and not merely that his longevity would improve as a consequence of technological and social progress. In that respect, he claims, not without reason, that his theory is wholly original: "The authors who have published their conjectures respecting the possibility of extending the term of human life are many. The most illustrious of these is probably lord Bacon; the most recent is Condorcet, in his *Outlines of a History of the Progress of the Human Mind*, published since the appearance of this work. These authors however have inclined to rest their hopes rather upon growing perfection of art than, as is here done, upon the immediate and unavoidable operation of an improved intellect" (*Political Justice* [1985] 770-71n).

168 *Flim-Flams!*, published anonymously in 1805, and in a revised and enlarged edition the following year, has never been republished since and therefore remains one of Isaac D'Israeli's most obscure books. The author seems to have thought that the book, who was received with severity, was not a credit to his name, and never acknowledged authorship.



Of special interest to us is chapter XVII, in this second, substantially altered, edition of *Flim-Flams!*, the motto of which is a direct quotation of Godwin's text, with which D'Israeli did not tamper but by adding some emphatic capitals: "If VOLITION can now do something, why should it not GO ON, to do still MORE and MORE?" ([1806] 1:210). This title sets the tone of the satire. It was wise of D'Israeli to let the sentence speak for itself; he could scarcely have heightened its comic effect. Underlying Godwin's rhetorical question is the only argument he presents in support of his hypothesis that man will soon overcome sickness, death, and sex by mere dint of volition—that is what he means by "more and more." The reasoning behind this hardly justifies Godwin's pretensions to correct Wollstonecraft's "faulty" logic; on the contrary, the reasoning it expresses is shamelessly fallacious, not to say childish.

First, Godwin "suggests" (this is his word) that our being able to achieve *something* by voluntary exertion—who will dare gainsay him? —*somehow* supports his proposition that we may effect *anything*—provided, of course, we are not distracted or fall asleep. This is a fallacy according to Aristotelian and inductive logic alike. And then, the terms of Godwin's proposition are too vague; indeed, his initial tautological assertion that volition "does something" is so vague as to be practically meaningless, and the "proposition" itself hardly deserves the name, as it too can mean practically anything. And then, Godwin further presents the impossibility of disproving this pseudo-proposition, which is too vague for verification, as evidence of its veracity—another breach of philosophical decorum.

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The story of the publication of *Flim-Flams!* is detailed in Samuel Smiles's *A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray* (1891). As this book provides the only published evidence for the attribution of the satirical novel to D'Israeli, I transcribe here the relevant passages:

"In 1804 Mr D'Israeli was engaged upon a work which is now all but forgotten, and of which Lord Beaconsfield [Benjamin Disraeli] seems not to have been aware, as he makes no mention of it in the Memoir of his father prefixed to the 'Curiosities of Literature' in 1865.

"The author, however, as is evident from his constant allusions to it, and its anxiety about its success, attached great importance to this book, which was entitled 'Flim-Flams! or the Life and Errors of my Uncle (...).' The work is rather ridiculous, and it is difficult now to discern its purpose, or even the humor with which the author would appear to have prided himself" (1: 43).

Despite D'Israeli's high hopes, the book was harshly criticised, and fearing a libel suit might be filed against him, he even considered interrupting the printing of the second edition (see Smiles, *A Publisher* 44-46).

Godwin, however, is careful not to claim that the indisputable fact that man has a will *demonstrates* the proposition he is too cautious to state flatly. Though at first the writer may appear prudent, this procedure is itself misleading. The reasoner, it seems, would not extract the reader's consent at any price, but is anxious that his claims be appreciated under the proper light. He thus projects an image of scrupulousness and honesty. Of course, by so doing, he lets his "suggestion" stand without any valid argument, while effectively placing it beyond the reach of empirical test. In addition, his suggestion that his honesty guaranteed the validity of the claim is fundamentally dishonest. The rhetorical devices of "suggestion" employed by Godwin here are, incidentally, very similar to those for which Poe is known.

D'Israeli also indirectly accuses Godwin of attempting to further his argument by unscrupulously associating it with an illustrious natural philosopher, Benjamin Franklin. And he was absolutely right. The title of chapter XVII of the second edition of *Flim-Flams!*, "The Omnipotence of Mind over Matter, Being a Veracious Account of a Shake from a Pear-Tree" ([1806] 1: 210), alludes to a "sublime conjecture" attributed by Godwin to Franklin, whom he presents, in an addition he made to the second revised edition, and kept in the third, as "a man habitually conversant with the system of the external universe, and by no means propense to extravagant speculations" (*Political Justice* [1985] 770).<sup>169</sup>

This is an argument of authority if ever I saw one—the last thing one would expect from a rationalist. Surely, a speculation championed by such a man cannot *be* "extravagant," though it might look that way to those less "conversant" than he with natural philosophy. Once more Godwin is caught red-handed trying to sway the public's judgement by unphilosophical means; inducing his reader, that is, to turn off his mind, abandon all hope of understanding the issue, and submit implicitly and without criticism to the judgement of an expert. This is a very serious offense indeed against the principles laid out by Descartes.

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<sup>169</sup> Franklin's "sublime conjecture" appears in page 862 of the first edition.

Godwin forestalls this accusation, however unconvincingly, by placing his conjecture on the margin of his arguments, insulating them, as it were, from such bold predictions—which, of course, is also a way of placing it beyond the reach of rational analysis. This strategy became even more evident in the third edition, where he relegated a slightly less enthusiastic proposal to an appendix, with the following prefatory remark: “What follows must be considered as eminently a deviation into the land of conjecture. If it be false, it leaves the system to which it is appended, in all sound reason, as impregnable as ever” (*Political Justice* [1985] 770). From a methodological point of view, I find the suggestion that his hypothesis *could* be proved false intriguing.

But, if the conjecture had nothing to do with the argument, why mention Franklin at all, then, when his very name, and the prestige that it carried, was liable to prevent an unprejudiced look on the matter? Godwin, it would seem, wants to have the cake and eat it too. This is exactly the kind of name-dropping for which Poe’s narrators are notorious—but Poe was writing fiction, and thus had, as he made very clear in “The Philosophy of Composition,” a duty to deceive the public. Godwin could not, and certainly would not, claim such a license for his philosophy. Yet, and quite unaccountably, he certainly did grant himself this license.

D’Israeli’s satire also implies the more serious imputation that Godwin borrowed the credit of the renowned natural philosopher for his theory by fraud. In order to hint at this, D’Israeli transcribes, in his footnote to the title of Chapter XVII, Godwin’s appeal to Franklin, as it stood in the second edition of the *Enquiry*, with added emphasis and occasional comments:

We find in “POLITICAL JUSTICE” (two strangely-coupled words) this memorable observation: / “FRANKLIN, a man habitually conversant with the system of external universe, and by no means propense to extravagant speculations, conjectured that MIND will one day become omnipotent OVER MATTER. In *whatever* sense HE

understood this expression, WE *are certainly at liberty to apply it in the sense* WE THINK PROPER.” (*Flim-Flams!* [1806] 1: 212n)<sup>170</sup>

Again, D’Israeli’s quotation is surprisingly accurate.<sup>171</sup> Godwin’s haughty disregard for Franklin’s “meaning,” in a context where he praises the older man’s good sense, is as disconcerting as it is indefensible. And then Godwin was apparently as little concerned with Franklin’s “meaning” as he was with his actual “words.” Indeed, it is by no means certain that the American had ever uttered the words which are attributed to him in *Political Justice*, in whatever sense. Disconcertingly candid, as always, Godwin admits this. The following footnote appeared in the first edition of *Political Justice*: “I have no other authority to quote for this expression but the conversation of Dr. Price. Upon enquiry I am happy to find it confirmed to me by Mr. William Morgan, the Nephew of Dr. Price, who recollects to have heard it repeatedly mentioned by his uncle” (862 emphasis mine). Judging from an alteration he made to the note in the second edition of *Political Justice*, Godwin later found out that the evidence was slightly less compelling than he had initially thought. The adjective “repeatedly” (underlined in my transcription) disappears, to indicate that Morgan heard his uncle mention Franklin’s dictum only once—however, Godwin compensates what was lost in frequency by distinctness: his friend now “distinctly remembers” his exchange with his uncle (*Political Justice* [1796] 1: 365).

But frankness and honesty are not necessarily the same thing. In this case, Godwin’s apparent scrupulousness is once again misleading. While we discuss *whether* Franklin actually said

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170 I have not seen the original second English edition of *Political Justice*, from which D’Israeli seems to be quoting. However, a “First American Edition From the Second London Edition Corrected” is available in Google Books, from which I transcribe the relevant passage: “Let us then in this place return to the sublime conjecture of Franklin, a man habitually conversant with the system of the external universe, and by no means propense to extravagant speculations, that ‘mind will one day become omnipotent over matter.’ In whatever sense he understood this expression, we are certainly at liberty to apply it in the sense we shall think proper. It is surely not unreasonable to ask, If the power of intellect can be established over all other matter, why not over the matter of our own bodies?” (Godwin, *Political Justice* [1796] 2: 377). The last sentence quoted was kept from the first edition, but would be omitted in the third.

171 He does not provide, however, a precise reference for the passage, which is absent from the first edition of *Political Justice*, from which he quotes the motto for the chapter. This leads me to infer that D’Israeli had used the second edition of *Political Justice* when he wrote the first version of the novel, and that he had the first edition in hand when he revised the text for the second edition of his novel.

what Godwin says, on the force of second-degree hearsay, he said, we are apt to lose sight of a more important question: what could he have meant by such a statement? Indeed, we have no context for Godwin's quotation, which is broad enough to be construed in any number of ways.

In the third edition Godwin corrected his hand, to a certain extent, but in a very awkward way. This final revision, incidentally, is foreshadowed by another slight alteration he had made to the second edition. Godwin mentions Franklin's "conjecture" twice in *Political Justice*—in all editions of the text. First, in connection to the foreseeable extinction of "manual labour" as a result of technological progress: "Hereafter it is by no means clear that the most extensive operations will not be within the reach of one man; or to make use of a familiar instance, that a plough may not be turned into a field, and perform its office without the need of superintendence" (Godwin *Political Justice* [1793] 845). This must not have seemed too bold a prediction to late eighteenth-century English audiences, who had witnessed industrial and agricultural developments such as their immediate ancestors could never have conceived. Later in the book, Godwin recovered the sentence Franklin had supposedly uttered in support of his own conjecture that man would soon become practically immortal.

In the first edition, then, the footnote stating the source of Godwin's information was appended to the first of these allusions to Franklin, the portion of the text where the possible extinction of manual labour is mentioned, which may be construed as a tacit avowal that the American was talking of the Industrial Revolution's effect on the structure of labour, or, in other words, that he could not possibly have meant the sentence in the sense Godwin will later in the book give it. In the second edition, however, the footnote migrates to the portion of the text that predicts the ultimate triumph of mind over matter, and the banishment of death and disease. D'Israeli was probably not the only one to point out to Godwin that one *should not* make free with another man's words.

Accordingly, in his final revision of the text, the footnote returned to its original position, and the following sentence was added when Franklin was mentioned in the chapter—now an appendix—about immortality. “The sense he [Franklin] annexed to this expression seems to have related to the improvements of human invention, in relation to machines and the compendium of labour” (Godwin, *Political Justice* [1985] 770-771). Finally, Godwin admits that Franklin could never have endorsed his conjecture. Still, rather than remove his unscholarly allusion to the American philosopher, he boldly admitted he could not care less about Franklin’s meaning. Godwin does not seem to realise his candour exposes the fundamental dishonesty of his procedure, while also exposing his gigantic ego. He just makes things too easy for a shrewd and scholarly satirist like D’Israeli, who maliciously intimates that Godwin was not merely a fool, but a stubborn and conceited fool. The following sample of dialogue, featuring Caconous, D’Israeli’s caricature of Godwin, in the aforementioned chapter XVII of *Flim-Flams!* (2nd ed.), and which clearly alludes to Godwin’s handling of Franklin’s name (if not exactly of his words), illustrates this:

“Pray, Mr. Caconous, (...) in what manner may a man build up a system, so indisputably his own, that no reasonable person shall ever lay claim to it?”

The great metaphysician replied, “In whatever sense a great genius understands a particular expression, we are positively at liberty to apply it, in the sense *we think proper*. It is thus I make something out of nothing!”

This was true—and give CACONOUS but an ABSURDITY, for his premises, and he would keep up such a racket in his metaphysics, that he seemed as disorderly as a drunken man, in a dark room! ([1806] 1: 211-212)

D’Israeli may have had a political bias against Godwin, the majority of whose arguments were not as easy to rebate, but his satire cannot be dismissed on that account. Much of its effectiveness comes from the reader’s sense that D’Israeli deals much more fairly with Godwin than he himself had dealt with Franklin. The humorist quotes Godwin with scrupulous accuracy in his

notes, and sometimes even in his text. Something is very wrong when the comedian can afford to be more scholarly than the butt of his jokes. The climax of the satire comes precisely with a parody of Godwin's prospect of the perfectibility of man:

Here he proceeded in a state of orgasm!

He asked us, why were we such fools as to *consent* to be sick, or to die? That a man was only old, because he did not *persist* in being young. Why were we not immortal? In the approaching age of *Will-ye Nill-ye*, the whole earth will be covered with a people of men, and not of children! There will be no sexes! The desiccating power of metaphysics (for it has wonderful dryness) will shrivel up every lineament of sex in the animal machine; then men will cease to propagate! they will sleep without night-caps, and be metaphysicked—*Will-ye Nill-ye!*

(*Flim-Flams!* [1806] 1: 216-217)

The reader not directly acquainted with Godwin's text would no doubt suppose this to be an extravagant caricature of his opinions. Lest we suspect him of distorting his sources, D'Israeli himself transcribes, in a footnote, and as accurately as usual—except for the added emphasis—the corresponding passages in Godwin's actual text. Almost everything Caconous says while in “a state of orgasm” can be found, in very nearly the same words, in *Political Justice*, and in a tone that expresses the same enthusiastic faith in the inevitability of the apocalyptic metamorphosis of “man.”

The caricaturist intervenes only in flatly stating what Godwin obscurely implies. Without the need to “propagate,” Godwin says sexual intercourse will no longer be necessary; D'Israeli takes up where he left off, drawing the obvious inference that the distinction of “sex” itself would then disappear. Tapping on the widespread false etymology of the word “metaphysics,” as the study of what lies *beyond* physical reality, D'Israeli uses it to denote the fundamentalist rejection of the

“physical,” i.e., matter, the senses, and the body.<sup>172</sup> He maliciously implies this mistaken conception of “metaphysics” will inevitably shrivel up *the student’s* every “lineament of sex,” that is, his sexual characteristics, to such an extent that he will find himself unable to “propagate.” Again, in all fairness, the idea of the contraceptive properties of metaphysics is not altogether alien to Godwin’s thought. Incidentally, this is the same ironic use of the term that we have found previously in this chapter in Hogg’s *Private Memoirs*.

The emphasis placed by D’Israeli on sex, moreover, lends an equivocal meaning to the phrase “state of orgasm,” in the first sentence. The word, in its etymological meaning, as D’Israeli no doubt knew, referred to a swelling, and was already employed in physiology, since the seventeenth-century, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* attests, to denote a state of excitement in any organ of the body caused by an excessive accumulation of “humours” that required release, but already tended to be mostly applied, in that sense, to sexual matters (see def. 2a). The word had also a psychological sense, but the process of specialisation that eventually made this sense inviable in modern English was already under way. An innocent reading of D’Israeli’s text was, of course, still technically possible in 1805—but only technically, in such a highly sexualised context.

The physiological undercurrent evoked by D’Israeli is, therefore, not merely a metaphor for Caconous enthusiasm: the suggestion is that that he perversely satisfied a necessity of “animal economy” through the impassioned speech in which he denies that necessity. In other words, D’Israeli’s humour depends on the idea that Caconous’s philosophy is a revulsive for his pent-up libido. In D’Israeli’s satirical vocabulary, moreover, “metaphysics” is code for the unreasonable denial of the contingencies of physical existence. The general idea is that Godwin’s philosophy is full of sublimated sexual meanings that should be obvious to anyone but those who share his puritanical deliriums.

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<sup>172</sup> According to the *OED* the term was originally applied to the “thirteen books of Aristotle dealing with questions of ‘first philosophy’ or ontology:” “This title doubtless originally referred (as some of the early commentators state) to the position which the books so designated occupied in the received arrangement of Aristotle’s writings (...). It was, however, from an early period used as a name for the branch of study treated in these books, and hence came to be misinterpreted as meaning ‘the science of things transcending what is physical or natural.’”



The original version of the novel was even harsher on Godwin. There, Godwin's most extravagant statement crops up in a scene in which the narrator's uncle Jacob, Kill-Joy (a caricature of Godwin's friend Thomas Holcroft), and Caconous<sup>173</sup> are discussing the pros and cons of marriage, and in which the latter expresses his general scorn for women: "Is this an age for marriage? Look at the puny two-footed calves about us! In an age of universal emancipation 'MEN will cease to *propagate*, and the whole will be *a people of men*, and not of CHILDREN!'" (D'Israeli, *Flim-Flams!* [1805] 3: 60-61). The inevitable footnote reads "Literally transcribed from POLITICAL JUSTICE!" (61n). The emphasis, of course, is placed on "men," to suggest that Godwin thought the world would be much better off without women. Thus, D'Israeli renders more perceptive Godwin's own suggestion that the "universal emancipation" he championed in *Political Justice* was not that "universal."

*Flim-Flams!* was published, of course, at a time when the philosopher had already broken his resolution of never marrying, and, though D'Israeli certainly had no more sympathy for her project of political emancipation than he had for Godwin's, I believe he meant to allude to Wollstonecraft when he had Caconous say: "When a woman once has a system of her own in her head, will she give it up to her husband's hypothesis?" (*Flim-Flams!* [1805] 71-72). These words, being ascribed to a character that ostensibly represents Godwin in his bachelor days, when he was at the peak of his popularity, are invested with a sort of tragic irony. Without so much as mentioning her name, D'Israeli reminds us that Godwin had indeed married a woman that had a "system" in her head, suggesting that he resented her for her independence, and also for having caused him to give up his "hypothesis" concerning marriage. And then, of course, Wollstonecraft had championed the emancipation of woman, which Godwin had tacitly rejected in his most influential work. D'Israeli's satire, therefore, slyly intimates that the marriage of two individuals with such radically incompatible views could not be a happy one, no matter what Godwin said.

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173 In the first edition of the novel the character's name was hyphenated: "Caco-nous."

My reason for bringing D’Israeli into the discussion is to show how closely Godwin’s public image in the early nineteenth-century matched the profile of Poe’s narrators, and how much it differs from the idea we have of Godwin today. The two defining traits of D’Israeli’s caricature of him, aside from his suspicion of women, are a rigid puritanical negation of sexuality, and what can only be termed his superstitious belief in the indefinite extension of life. Indeed, Godwin’s “conjecture” that man would banish death, being ostensibly based on an intuition that overrides reason and logical inquiry, is, in the proper sense of the term, a superstition. Ironically, this belief in an intuited “truth” one cannot justify rationally exactly corresponds to Godwin’s own description of the way in which Wollstonecraft formed her opinions, and not the description of the way he reached his. In this case, at least, he appears not to have been as “anxious” not to be deceived or as suspicious of first impressions as he claims in *Memoirs* to have *always* been. In short, D’Israeli provides a relevant historical precedent for the sort of satire I think Poe intended.

D’Israeli also ridicules the way in which Godwin deliberately twists Franklin’s words to accommodate them to his visionary theory. This process is comparable to the way in which the narrator of Poe’s tales projects his superstition on his wife’s words, taking them out of context and disregarding their meaning. This in turn appears to me a perfect metaphor of the kind of misreading of Wollstonecraft’s words that Godwin’s *Memoirs* invites, and which is exemplified by Todd and Clemit and Walker’s assessments of her. Morella was talking of her *physical* relationship with her husband, but he forces a “metaphysical” meaning unto her words, to suggest she was prophesying her own reincarnation. Something very similar happens in “Ligeia.” In that tale, the narrator projects on his wife’s words precisely the kind of highly unusual “conjecture” that D’Israeli had found so hilarious in *Political Justice*.

But, although the construal the narrator places on Ligeia’s words matches Godwin’s conjecture, the words themselves, as I have previously pointed out, resemble many passages in Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication*. Here is an example:

Gracious Creator of the whole human race! hast thou created such a being as woman, who can trace thy wisdom in thy works, and feel that thou alone art by nature exalted above her, —for no better purpose? — Can she believe that she was only made to submit to man, her equal, a being, who, like her, was sent into the world to acquire virtue? — Can she consent to be occupied merely to please him; merely to adorn the earth, when her soul is capable of rising to thee? — And can she rest supinely dependent on man for reason, when she ought to mount with him the arduous steps of knowledge? (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 136)

Like Ligeia, Wollstonecraft is claiming that she is “part and parcel” in God, that is, that woman is a complete and autonomous human being unto herself. This is the religious expression of her feminist argument. Through the exercise of reason, she is capable of recognising the evidence of a governing principle in Nature, and from that to deduce the idea of God. By addressing herself directly to this superior being, Wollstonecraft demonstrates, in the terms of her deism, at the same time her rationality and her “immortality,” that is, that she too has a soul. She thought, of course, that the theory of the separate spheres denied women souls.

I think Godwin honestly did not understand what Wollstonecraft was trying to say and achieve any more than Poe’s narrators understood their wives. This passage also illustrates an important difference between their styles. In his own work, he is seldom in control of the suggestions that run below the grammatical, obvious sense of his statements, and this often results in involuntary comic. Wollstonecraft, on the contrary, put such suggestions at the service of her arguments, and in this sense was a much more sophisticated, and deliberate writer than he was.

In the passage quoted above, for example, the sexual undercurrent complements the obvious meaning, by suggesting that man’s desire to subject women was rooted in male sexual anxiety. This suggestion in turn chimes in with Wollstonecraft’s claim that women were not really being subjected to man’s reason, most men being, as she saw it, as fully irrational as most women, but to

his lust. Thus, woman was in fact forcefully constrained to submit to his sexual appetites, and this subjecting was disguised, in the language of man, as a submission to reason. She states elsewhere in the book that the education women received compelled them to be “the slaves of casual lust, which is now the situation of a very considerable number who are, literally speaking, standing dishes to which every glutton may have access” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 208). The idea of sexual submission—or more precisely, Wollstonecraft’s revolutionary refusal to assume this position—is also suggested, in the passage I quoted earlier, by her use of the term “supinely.” Although ostensibly applied in reference to intellectual subjection, Wollstonecraft had already told us that this sort of language was a ruse, thereby subverting it. By impeding the intellectual development of woman, man was really interested in avoiding her sexual emancipation—that is, in keeping her in the submissive sexual stance evoked by the term “supine.” Such sexual implications, although not openly stated, are not extraneous to her rhetoric. They are, I think, integral to her project of linguistic subversion.

Yet, Godwin flatly states, as we have seen, her religion and philosophy were “the pure result of feeling and taste,” not of reason (*Memoirs* 121). The interpretation of her religious statements—which were really political statements—he encourages readers to make returns an image of Wollstonecraft that is not that far removed from the image Poe’s narrators convey of their wives. Indeed, her insistence that woman is “immortal,” and that she herself was immortal, can only be construed, in Godwin’s terms, as partaking of a spirit of wild mysticism. Thus, he suggests, that Wollstonecraft shared the unshakable intuitive faith in her own immortality that the narrator of the tale attributes to Ligeia.

Almost every word that is attributed to Wollstonecraft in the book contributes to this image. He reports, for example, that some days prior to her death, Wollstonecraft told him ““that she should have died the preceding night, but that she was determined not to leave me’” (Godwin, *Memoirs* 113). I see no reason to question Godwin’s veracity. But his choices can and should be questioned.

On the one hand, he either dismisses or distorts all of Wollstonecraft's public pronouncements in a way that makes her appear a visionary obsessed with death, and on the other he chooses to emphasise intimate statements such as this. This scene, whether he realised it or not, plays a decisive role in his rhetoric, as it apparently corroborates his claim that Wollstonecraft had eventually resigned to the "feminine" role of being the helpmate of her husband. Indeed, he makes it appear that she lived only for his sake, and even that her love had conquered, temporarily at least, death, and this through an act of will. Thus, his narrative supports the same kind of self-serving male fantasy that we find in "Ligeia."

Although he does not quote a single line from *A Vindication*, Godwin thus predisposes the reader to find signs of the mysticism he attributes to Wollstonecraft in that book, and, indeed, in all of her books. But her religious views are inseparable from the political argument. For Wollstonecraft, absolute monarchy and extreme patriarchy, for example, were two sides of the same coin: "What but a pestilential vapour can hover over society when its chief director is only instructed in the invention of crimes, or the stupid routine of childish ceremonies? Will men never be wise? — will they never cease to expect corn from tares, and figs from thistles?" (*Vindication* 85). Man, which had always been the undisputed ruler of society, had never been rational; he had always expected impossibilities. At the root of all his errors was domestic inequality:

we shall not see women affectionate till more equality be established in society, till ranks are [confounded and women freed, neither shall we see that dignified domestic happiness, the simple grandeur of which cannot be relished by ignorant or vitiated minds; nor will the important task of education ever be properly begun till the person of a woman is no longer preferred to her mind. For it would be as wise to expect corn from tares, or figs from thistles, as that a foolish ignorant woman should be a good mother. (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 263)

This is no doubt what Godwin had in mind when he complained of the “homily-language” in some passages of *A Vindication* (*Memoirs* 70). This was, he thought, one of the many defects that plagued the book. But Wollstonecraft’s appropriation of biblical imagery is always deliberate. She uses the same evangelical parable to condemn the two complementary aspects of man’s folly, the social and the sentimental. Her usage of such metaphors, being consistent with the overall argument, reinforces the internal cohesiveness of the book. Yet, the kind of steady adherence to a pre-defined purpose—which is arguably a description of good writing—illustrated by such sophisticated rhetorical strategies, is precisely the kind of thing Godwin tells us she, being a woman, was incapable of doing. Thus, he makes this kind of rhetorical effect invisible.

In my view, Godwin’s worse crime was to neutralise the aggressiveness of Wollstonecraft’s rhetoric by sentimentalising her figure. This aggressiveness was the most distinctive trait of her work. Because she refused to think or act in a “feminine” manner, Wollstonecraft also refused to plead submissively for equal rights. Rather, she demanded those rights, in the name of womankind, while actively threatening man’s rule through a form of cultural terrorism the like of which had, I think, never been attempted. She was not the first, however, to argue that the subjection of women contradicted the principles of Reformation. Some protestant thinkers had been arguing for years that fathers and husbands, inasmuch as they acted as mediators between women and God, were performing the same function priests performed for the faithful in Catholic societies.

William Law’s popular manual of “practical devotion,” *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, published in 1729, contained the same basic religious argument that Wollstonecraft would develop, many years later, in *A Vindication*. It is impossible to know for certain whether Wollstonecraft read this book, but Law had a great influence on the founders of Methodism, and therefore she almost certainly came into contact with the argument through her Methodist acquaintances. Like Wollstonecraft, Law considered that reason was man’s true “nature:” “All men (...) as men, have one and the same *important* business, to act up to the excellency of their rational

[that is, divine] nature, and to make *reason* and *order* the law of all their designs and actions” (Law, *Serious Call* 153). Law thus reconciles rationalism with religion by the same argument Wollstonecraft would use: God is reason itself, and it is man’s duty to live up to his divine nature. Blind devotion to the ministers of the Gospel should be replaced with an enlightened submission to pure reason. Law’s view that man’s irrationality is the result of a perverse upbringing that betrays his true nature is also typical of Enlightenment philosophy. According to this view, “education should be considered in no other light, than as the art of recovering to man the use of his reason,” that is, to restore him to the original purity of his nature (237).

Law also maintained that there was a common standard of excellence that applied to all human beings, regardless of sex or class. “Thus, in all orders and conditions either of man or woman, this is the one common holiness, which is to be the common life of all Christians” (Law, *Serious Call* 127). This view may be termed individualism. Law, however, unlike most contemporary thinkers, detaches woman from man, treating her as an individual moral agent. She too is an individual, and it was the duty of every individual to become rational, that is, to adopt the broadest possible outlook, in order to recognise in all circumstances which actions promoted the common good. Reason, understood as the power of abstraction and generalisation, was virtue, hence women could not possess one without the other.

Law also rejects the idea that woman is by nature more sensitive, and therefore more prone to irrationality, than man:

It is generally said, that women are naturally of little and vain minds; but this I look upon to be as false and unreasonable, as to say, that butchers are naturally cruel; for as their cruelty is not owing to their nature, but to their way of life, which has changed their nature; so whatever littleness and vanity is to be observed in the minds of women, it is like the cruelty of butchers, a temper that is wrought into them by that life which they are taught and accustomed to lead. (...) we cannot charge any thing

upon their [women's] nature, till we take care that it is not perverted by their education. (Law, *Serious Call* 352-3)

And, as Law saw it, the nature of woman had indeed been perverted by the expectations of man, which had always ruled over her: "mankind seem to consider them [women] in no other view, than as many painted idols, that are to allure and gratify their passions; so that if many women are vain, light, gawdaw creatures, they have this to excuse themselves, that they are not only such as their education has made them, but such as the generality of the world allows them to be" (Law, *Serious Call* 350). It is worth noticing that "mankind" is being used as a gendered term, which was unusual at the time. "Mankind," degrading women to the status of objects of desire, betrays the common nature of "humankind," therefore, sin against God. This, as we have seen, is exactly Wollstonecraft's argument. A society directed by men blames women for behaving exactly as they were expected to behave. We even find an echo of Law's phrase "little and vain minds" in Wollstonecraft's "little soul" (*Vindication* 100).

Law even advocated female intellectuality. Rejecting the idea that women should keep to a narrow sphere of interest, he encouraged them to extend their studies to all those areas of abstract thought from which she had hitherto been banned: "They [women] are not indeed suffered to dispute with us [men] the proud prizes of arts and sciences, of learning and eloquence, in which I have much suspicion they would often prove our superiors; but we turn them over to the study of beauty and dress, and the whole world conspires to make them think of nothing else" (Law, *Serious Call* 348). Law's "suspicion" may be condescending; however, it also poses an implied challenge to man's pride. If man is *as* superior as he thinks, why is he afraid of the competition? This is, of course, another of the core elements of Wollstonecraft's rhetoric.

Indeed, when she set herself to the task of advocating the rights of woman, she tapped on an existing tradition of dissent. Many of the ideas she develops in *A Vindication* had been circulating for quite a long time, and, although they may have been polemic, were not altogether unacceptable,



in certain circles at least. But, despite the superficial resemblances, Wollstonecraft's project of political reform was much more ambitious than Law's. She wanted a revolution in the home; whereas he was a reformist. Though advocating that women be permitted to study and compete with men on the arts and sciences, in his ideal picture of a family, woman was still very much subjected to man. To maintain this balance of domestic power, Eusebia, his fictional ideal wife, advises her daughters not to marry "till you find a man that has those perfections, which you have been labouring after yourselves; (...) with whom it is better to live, than to want the benefit of his example" (Law, *Serious Call* 370).

In practice, Law displays a zeal to avoid that women take the upper hand. In order to guarantee that the traditional balance of power in the home is not disrupted, he creates the expedient of having women voluntarily seeking "superior" men to whom they may "rationally" submit. Law thus perpetuates the notion that ideal marriages are those in which the wife meekly resigns to the superior authority of the husband. The fact that Law fails to even consider the changes that the emancipation of women would necessarily operate in the traditional power structure speaks volumes. The only reason why Eusebia, Law's wise model-mother, was permitted to advise her daughters was because she was a widow, or the task should have devolved upon the husband. By making her a widow, then, Law manages to show how a rational wife should behave without questioning the sacred—to him—patriarchal authority. Wollstonecraft, of course, subverted the discourse that supported the existing structure of power.

It may appear to the reader that I am digressing, but it appears to me that one cannot understand the nature of Wollstonecraft's enterprise unless one realises how she subverted the language that was available to her. Her genius lay precisely in subversion. She appropriated for herself the theories used to justify the subjection of women in a way that is at once extremely aggressive and incredibly subtle; in particular she appropriated religious imagery to threaten man's

sense of superiority, and exploit male sexual and intellectual anxieties. And this is what Godwin made it very hard for readers to realise.

Man condemned woman to servitude. “Make them free,” Wollstonecraft wrote, “and they will quickly become wise and virtuous, as men become more so; for the improvement must be mutual, or the justice which one half of the human race are obliged to submit to, retorting on their oppressors, the virtue of man will be worm-eaten by the insect whom he keeps under his feet” (Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 247). The etymological sense of the word “virtue,” itself a vestige of the old notion that morality is male by definition, clearly intimates that man will be *unmanned* by his injustice. It appears to me that the suggestion is intentional: in the language of reason the sentence translates as “man will lose that which makes him human;” but, in the language “of man,” it means that he will lose that which makes him *masculine*.

As long as he persists in considering intellect as a sexual characteristic, then, man will feel threatened, indeed, emasculated by intellectual women. Wollstonecraft suggests that he should feel threatened. Indeed, she fostered the fear of unenlightened men, through a sort of psychological terrorism. Perverted men might not be persuaded to act in the behalf of women—or, as Wollstonecraft would prefer to say, on their own behalf: “Educated in slavish dependency, and enervated by luxury and sloth, where shall we find men who will stand forth to assert the rights of man” (*Vindication* 114). Perhaps fear of emasculation might stimulate such men to action. For man could never get rid of this anxiety, Wollstonecraft tells us, until he became wise, that is, until he understood the true meaning of virtue, and accepted to live with women on terms of equality. Therefore, women could not depend on men to bring about the change Wollstonecraft envisaged. They had to force the change, and one of the ways to do this, perhaps the only one, she thought, was to subvert *his* language.

She sought to emancipate sexual differences from the traditional dominance-submission model, and, by so doing, helped, as I have before stated, to establish the idea of gender. At the time,

this was certainly a revolutionary notion. Therefore, she expected to be misunderstood. Her tragedy was not having realised that Godwin was among those who, not being able to understand her, would feel threatened by her. Virginia Woolf, who realised, in part, that Wollstonecraft was not what Godwin had made her out to be, proclaimed Wollstonecraft's immortality, or rather predicted her resurrection when she was still very much buried in oblivion, where her husband had left her. "She whose sense of her own existence was so intense," Woolf wrote,

died at the age of thirty-six. But she has her revenge. Many millions have died and been forgotten in the hundred and thirty years that have passed since she was buried; and yet as we read her letters and listen to her arguments and consider her experiments, above all, that most fruitful experiment, her relation with Godwin, and realise the high-handed and hot-blooded manner in which she cut her way to the quick of life, one form of immortality is hers undoubtedly; she is alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living. ("Four Figures," 199-200)

Although Woolf had not much sympathy for Godwin—she called him "the little man with the big head"—Woolf's version of Wollstonecraft is still basically his ("Four Figures" 197). Wollstonecraft's extraordinary life encompassed many different experiments, the least relevant of which was certainly not her career as a female philosopher. But Godwin presented himself as her most important experiment—this did not make him look too good, but it made her look much worse. I think Wollstonecraft is only now beginning to have her well-deserved revenge on Godwin.

Wollstonecraft's true resurrection will be the full recognition of the female intellectual. "Ligeia," which I have called a feminist apocalypse, is, I believe, a prophecy of this resurrection, which would come as people realised the necessity of separating Wollstonecraft from Godwin's portrait of her. In order that her intellectual achievements might be appreciated correctly, her interests must no longer be confused with the interests of her conqueror, for her true experiment was

intellectual emancipation—likewise, the interests of Ligeia must not be identified with her conqueror. This, I believe, was Poe's point. It may be more accurate to say, however, that Poe realised the significance of Wollstonecraft's example, and used her story as a blueprint for a prophecy of his own. This is the prophecy that is buried in his tale, that woman would one day rise to challenge man's *de facto* monopoly of intellect.

## Appendix:

The following is a chronology of the publication of *The Confessions of an Unexecuted Femicide* by Robert Macnish in the periodical press. Whenever possible, I have indicated, between round brackets, the online repositories which hold digitised collections of the papers in question.

### 1 – Britain and Ireland

- *Albion* 20 Aug. 1827 (?)

Note: I could not find a copy of this publication, from which the American papers who published the story claim to have taken it. The *British Museum Catalogue of Printed Books. Supplement: Newspapers Published in Great Britain and Ireland, 1801-1900* mentions an *Albion* of Liverpool, which ran continuously from Jan. 1, 1827 to Oct. 30, 1871.

- *St. James Chronicle* (?)

Note: This publication is mentioned by Macphun in the fourth pamphlet edition and may be presumed to be the original two-installment version of *Confessions*.

- *The Standard* 23 Aug. 1827. (British Newspaper Archive)

Note: As I explain in the main text, this is the earliest newspaper edition of the two-part version of Macnish's tale that I saw.

- *The Liverpool Mercury* 24 Aug. 1827.

- *The Kaleidoscope, or, Literary and Scientific Mirror*. 28 Aug. 1827.

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